# The Belly Dancer Project: A Phenomenological Study of Gendered Identity through Documentary Filmmaking

by

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the researcher develops a documentary-driven methodology to understand the ways four women in the United States use their involvement in the belly dance phenomenon to shape their ongoing individual identity development. The filmmaking process itself and its efficacy as a process to promote self-understanding and identity growth among the participating belly dancers, are also investigated phenomenologically. Methodological steps taken in the documentary-driven methodology include: initial filmed interviews, co-produced filmed dance performances, editorial interviews to review footage with each dancer, documentary film production, dancer-led focus groups to screen the film, and exit interviews with each dancer. The project generates new understandings about the ways women use belly dance to shape their individual identities to include: finding community with other women in private women's spaces, embodying the music through the dance movements, and finding liberation from their everyday "selves" through costume and performance.

# DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the beautiful dancer in each of us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Bob Bolin, for his teachings, inspiration, and patient guidance since my first day of graduate school, in August, 2001. He taught me to truly *critically* question the world around me, and more than once forced me to critically question my decision to give up this dream. I thank Michelle Hegmon for showing me the path to become an anthropologist in The School of Human Evolution and Social Change, and for continuing to open doors for me along the way. I also thank Leif Jonsson, who has provided encouragement, insightful critique, and friendship during this process.

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I did not do this alone. Namaste.

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE BELLY DANCER PROJECT

> Belly dance exists at the edge of our imaginations, where the histories we think we know, collide with the exotic images we entertain in fantasy. The promise that a belly dancer can experience this alternate reality with other dancers or with an audience, presents perhaps the most potent draw that the belly dance phenomenon possesses (The Belly Dancer Project Documentary Voiceover).

This dissertation research project (The Belly Dancer Project) is designed to examine individual identity development by looking at some of the ways women reflect on their belly dance practices. I employ a reflexive methodology that allows belly dancers to react to their own narratives and the stories of other dancers, in order to add their own thoughts to the developing Belly Dancer Project story. This methodology is dual-layered, in that it also incorporates a critical reflection about my own experience of the research process

In this process I guide several featured dancer participants through an exploration of their identities as they are interlaced with the participants' everyday lived practices of belly dance. To do this, I begin with an individual interview; then also film each dancer in a solo or group (of their choice) performance of their dance art. The filmed data generated from these methods are reviewed with the dancer in order to generate additional reflections and allow her into the editorial process. The raw footage is then edited together with the three other featured dancers' footage into a documentary film. This compiled video is then screened by the dance group/friends each dancer chooses to invite (in the form of several filmed focus groups), in order to capture these belly dancers' reactions to the featured dancers' stories and performances, as well as to stimulate a discussion of the focus group

members' experiences of identity and everyday lived practices as belly dancers. Following each focus group/screening, the featured dancer is again interviewed about her experience during the screening and the entire project. All of these data are captured for description and interpretation using an array of qualitative analysis methods.

The research questions for this study have been framed in this way:

Research Questions:

> *RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?*
>
> *RQ2: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?*

First, this dissertation project is a study of belly dancers, and their experiences of the identity process. This involves looking into the lives of dancers through filmed interviews and performances, then screening and discussing those interviews and performances with the dancer, and finally with dancers' circles of dance friends. This process is meant to not only describe and interpret how belly dance influences the dancers' development of identity, but to also describe and interpret the women's reflections on this development by seeing themselves and others on video.

Second, this project does not merely use methods to answer a question – it is focused on the methodological choices that are made to study belly dancers and their identity development process. In this sense, the dancers and their identities are part of a case study meant to test these, I draw particular attention to the individual experiential lens through which each woman sees the shared activity (belly dance)

and herself vis-à-vis that activity. I then use *individual* belly dancers and their distinct identity construction projects as the subject with which to test an experimental, multi-method approach that incorporates filming, editing, and screening a documentary in order to learn more about the participant (subject) and the methodological process itself.

Therefore, I should make it clear that this is not a study of belly dancers (plural) as a group, sub-culture, or community. It is instead a study of the individuals who have chosen to participate in a shared activity or phenomenon – belly dancing. This is also not a study seeking to produce a representative cross-section of American belly dancers, in hopes of making generalizations about such a population. It is rather a description and interpretation of the individual selves shared with me, the researcher, by the belly dancers who have chosen to participate as featured dancers in the documentary, and the focus group participants (also dancers) who have screened the documentary.

American belly dancers have been chosen for this methodological experiment for several reasons. The first is that they are incredibly interesting from a number of standpoints including: feminism, performance, public culture, women's communities, subcultures, embodiment, material culture, Orientalism/Occidentalism[1], and invented traditions. As such, belly dance is an intriguingly nebulous subject around which to construct an identity.

To begin to put the activity in perspective:

> Belly dance is not historically a single dance but a complex of movement practices or vocabularies that extends from North Africa

[1] This term is taken from the works of Edward Said (1994[1979]) and others critical to the widespread occidental hegemonies that that perpetuate pejorative non-western stereotypes.

> through the Middle East and Central Asia to the western portion of the Indian subcontinent as well as western China. Unlike musical forms in the Arab, Iranian and Turkish worlds, this dance complex does not have a classical tradition, i.e. a named vocabulary, an academy, or a set of named, standardized movements for purposes of teaching. In fact, the specific part of the body that initiates the movement vocabulary in belly dance varies throughout this area, and probably varied historically as well (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005:1-2).

Likewise, the American women who engage in belly dance vary widely in: demographic characteristics (age, education, race, ethnicity, cultural background, income, familial circumstance), gendered identities, motivations for involvement, dance learning experiences, aesthetic preference for dance and costume style, embodiment experiences, religious perspectives, political views, and geographic/spatial location. Once such characteristics of the Research Question-1 subject are understood, it becomes fairly obvious why generating anything approaching group characteristics, generalizability, or trend data is *not* the aim of this project.

Rather, the individuals who belly dance make intriguing subject matter for a phenomenological study of this sort due to the ways in which they employ the shared activity to uniquely situate and experience themselves at several symbolic crossroads. According to Donalee Dox, this dance activity taken-up by so many American women might better be understood as, "an elaborate symbol system derived from ideas about ancient Middle Eastern cultures adopted to explain belly dance as a western practice and to embody certain reactions to first-world, western culture" (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005:16-17). Dox then goes on to explain how practicing belly dancers in a way play with these oriental/occidental symbols to dance in and out of western hegemonies. "The result is a hermeneutics that

'responds to the perceived limitations of the latter culture and constructs an idealized version of the former.' Within this practice, the female body becomes an 'icon' of a natural world, a medium of spirituality which stands in opposition to the materialism of western industrialism" (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005:17).

Donalee Dox is one of a small coterie of academics to take up the challenge of theorizing how the belly dance phenomenon is situated within western culture. And while it is on the one hand of weighty importance for me to likewise explore and posit ways in which these symbolic layers interlace, it is a more fundamental, grounded task to understand the ways in which the belly dancers themselves experience the phenomenon. This framing accounts for one of several reasons why I have developed a complex methodology around exploring the individual belly dancers' experiences of themselves through the lens of belly dance. And the theoretical/methodological toolkit I have found to best help me privilege the dancers' voices in this way is phenomenology.

**Seeing through a Phenomenological Lens**

*Phenomenology as Theoretical Framework*

The philosophical grounding for this project comes from existential phenomenology, an area of phenomenological philosophy concerned with "approaches to human experience in which consciousness (is) viewed as neither self-sufficient nor as located in the unreachable interior of a thinking subject but, rather, as a relationship between the living subject and his or her world" (Pollio et al., 1997:4). The promise of an approach which neither resorts to mentality or solipsism is substantial for a project focused on discovering the lived experiences of identity,

among members of a subculture such as American belly dance, in which involvement rests both on physical engagement and on creating imagined worlds.

All phenomenological investigation signifies a study of the phenomenon, or that which manifests in consciousness as it appears, and aims to trace all knowledge back to a radical non-knowledge (Lyotard, 1991). From its Husserlian beginnings, the movement presses to move beyond trends of top-down explanations of things, and instead toward broader understandings of the phenomena through description and analysis (Cummings, 1991).

In 1900 German philosopher Edmund Husserl coined the term phenomenology to describe an interest in those things that can be directly experienced using one's senses (Elliot 1999). This definition highlights the lynchpin of this theoretical school – it claims that the subject can never know more about 'things' than what we directly see of the world (or touch, smell, hear, etc. of it). Husserl was interested in studying the structure of consciousness, and in order to do so, he proposed conceptually separating the actual act of consciousness (which involves identity) from the phenomena toward which the act of consciousness is directed, and by looking at these microsocial interactions between the consciousness and the other, we are able to better understand how individual identity is constituted in interaction with the surrounding phenomena. Therefore, all knowledge is derived from sensory experience. Phenomenology is then quite literally, a study of how we see the world (or touch it, etc.). Within this paradigm we continue to refine our perceptions of the world based on our continued interaction with it (Elliot 1999).

Phenomenological philosophies inform The Belly Dancer Project on two primary levels. First, phenomenology (in its more esoteric, philosophical moods) is

used to frame the subject of investigation: the individual identity. This can be seen in the first research question: *RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?* For the researcher, this involves asking myself to bracket off my own preconceived beliefs in order to see the phenomenal world of each belly dancer, in order to see how she constructs her world and her identity within that world. The question also calls on me to describe how each belly dancer reflects upon her own experience from her uniquely-situated perspective, so far as her sense of self or identity is concerned.

*Phenomenology as Methodology*

According to Husserl, the phenomenological process begins by discarding previous theoretical frameworks in favor of a process of careful description of phenomena, being attentive only to what is intellectually intuitive. Intuition, in this sense, means placing one's self within the subject's point of view via the methodological process of discovery (Moran 2000). In 1934 naturalist Jakob von Uexkull asked readers to, "blow, in fancy, a soap bubble around each creature to represent its own world, filled with perceptions it alone knows…Through the bubble we see…the world as it appears to the animal, not as it appears to us. This we may call the phenomenal world or the *self world* of the animal" (italics in original, Pollio et al., 1997:3). By a lengthy process of description, the self world (which has also been referred to as lifeworld) of the human animals making-up the phenomenon comes into focus. This presumptionless beginning is often referred to as bracketing off one's own theories and preconceived beliefs in order to arrive at phenomenological understandings (rather than knowledge).

This leads to the second way The Belly Dancer Project is shaped by phenomenological influences. Phenomenology serves as justification and muse for the very reflective methodological position employed in this project, as can be seen in the second research question: *RQ2: In what ways are the interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?* If phenomenology is concerned with the study of the phenomenon, or that which manifests in consciousness as it appears, analyzing the methods used to collect observations and then create understandings about the highly subjective topic under investigation is every bit as essential as is investigating the ways identity manifests itself in the dancers. As will be demonstrated throughout the remainder of this dissertation, all measures taken to innovatively combine and tailor data collection and analysis methods are done to support this phenomenological goal. If rephrased thusly, the two-tiered project first aims to study the identity development within belly dancers and the ways women reflect upon this development. This is *also* a study that aims to target the *ways* this phenomenon appears through the lens of social science research, which forces an integrated and central analysis of the methods used to collect observations, and then describe and analyze them.

**Methodology under Investigation**

In The Belly Dancer Project, the methodology is more than a means to an end, but is under investigation in its own right, as is demonstrated in the second research question: *RQ2: In what ways are the interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?* As social scientists

become more cognizant of the research process itself, and their experience within that research process, the research ought to become a more consciously understood process, and the quality of the research should increase. In this case, there are several steps implemented to not only draw the research participants deeper into the research process, but also to force the researcher to pause and reexamine the emergent descriptions and interpretations. These descriptions and interpretations of the identity experience of the belly dancers, as well as the research experience itself, are together the topic under investigation.

> If method and phenomenon arise from common concerns – how the world of everyday human experience is to be described – we have a situation appropriate to the original meaning of the word method, a meaning that combines the word hodos, a path or way, with the word meta, across or beyond. Under this rendering, method is not an algorithmic procedure to be followed mechanically if useful results are to be achieved; rather, method is a way or path toward understanding that is as sensitive to its phenomenon as to its own orderly and self-correcting aspects (Pollio et al., 1997:28).

Taking from Pollio and his phenomenological view of methods, the methodology – seen as a pathway across the research process – is extremely interesting in its own right. Following this, the present study is equally if not more about the methods used and the ways they were employed than it is about the case study of belly dancers and their identity process.

**Feminist Research and Shifting the Balance of Research Power**

According to Max Travers (2001), the most distinctive quality of feminist qualitative research is the emphasis placed on reflexivity about the research process. Studies generally are written in the first person, and include at least some of the difficulties involved in conducting the research. There is a broader discussion about the differences in perspective and awareness between researcher and participants

than is typically seen in other methods. In this sense, The Belly Dancer Project fits squarely into the feminist qualitative research camp Travers describes. The entire purpose of having a second (editorial) interview in which the participant and I go over her filmed interview and performance videos together is to offer a venue for additional reflection, and allow the featured dancer into the choices taking place in the editing room. Methodological choices of this nature can also be seen as intending to increasing the participants' relative voice/agency in telling their own stories, and shifting the balance of power from researcher to "subject" in the research process.

Travers goes on to say that feminists are often committed to consciousness-raising (political and otherwise) as a means of increasing awareness among the groups they study about the situations they are in. This process of the "editorial interview" helps to raise the consciousness of the women being included as featured dancers, and myself the researcher as well. Brought together in this endeavor, the reflexivity of the research design requires that we discuss our interactions, the ways those interactions came across on screen (a reflexive medium in itself), and talk further about the issues brought-up throughout the research process. Inevitably this incorporates our own experiences with the gendered identity process.

According to postmodernist Steinar Kvale (1996), feminist approaches often share a common focus on the everyday lives of women. They center on women's diverse situations and the frames that shape those situations. Defined in this way, feminist research is "qualitative research by women 'on' women, and must take women's oppression as one of its basic assumptions" (Kvale 1996:73). Gender is used in feminist studies as a basic organizing principle that shapes the concrete conditions of our lives.

In The Belly Dancer Project, only women are involved as featured dancers and focus group participants. I, the researcher, am likewise a woman who has participated in the belly dance phenomenon as a dancer. I not only aim, in this research, to describe and explicate the lives of the women in the project, but also to better understand how belly dance is being used as a powerful device in their lives such that it empowers them to incite change in other parts of their lives. This is not just an unnecessarily complex research project intended to learn more about a fringe group of women, but is rather political in that it shares with American belly dance phenomenon itself the ability to empower women. This focus on *empowerment* is why it is of such paramount importance to design and document intense reflexivity at each point of the research process in order to ensure that the balance of power remains in the hands (and hips) of the women whose stories are being told.

The Belly Dancer Project is not blatantly political in nature, but rather carries political connotations by seeking to empower women, then immediately evaluating its ability to do this. The initial, filmed interviews present the dancers with such topics such as, "How have you changed because of belly dance?" If one looks between the lines of this topic, it is easy to see how relatively simple prompts – when answered over five or fifteen minutes – reveal the ways the dancers have tapped into the various aspects of the belly dance phenomenon in their continual construction of identity. This translates as their ability to relate with the music, create and wear the culturally amalgamous costumes, participate in the woman-centered communities of dancers, and perform the dance movements touted as being long-ago created by and for women's bodies. Other topics, such as, "How do you feel when you're dancing / costuming / listening to BD music, etc.?" follow-up on these themes, and are

phrased thusly so as to phenomenologically explore the participants' sensorial experiences.

Within the armory of popular feminist research devices are several approaches that dovetail with the overarching phenomenological approach I employ. Standpoint research, "emphasizes the need to focus on women's experiences in everyday life as it is familiar to them. Those experiences are constantly shaped, created, and re-created by women" (Olesen in Madriz 2003: 369). In some ways The Belly Dancer Project can be construed as standpoint research, in that the phenomenological lens refracts all of the understandings generated through the soap bubble of each participant's everyday lived world. And her lived experiences are of course continually and dynamically recreated by her in her social contexts.

Postmodern feminism that "focuses on stories and narratives and on the construction and reproduction of knowledge" (Madriz 2003:369) was also drawn upon in shaping this research endeavor. With this project, I am much more interested in generating rich narratives and understandings from the women who participate in the belly dance phenomenon than I am in producing large amounts of parallel data structured along lines I have mandated.

Therefore, over numerous incarnations and pilot efforts, The Belly Dancer Project has organically evolved into a documentary-driven methodology that incorporates:

- Recruitment discussions/negotiations with each dancer
- A filmed interview about each participant's lived experiences with belly dance
- Discussions to stage and film her dance performance

- An editorial interview where we review and discuss her filmed interview and performance footage
- The documentary I create with introductory material, a full performance piece (song) by each dancer, and several emergent themes shaped by combined interview footage
- Documentary film screening parties (focus groups) hosted by each dancer, and composed of dancer colleagues of her choosing, to view the film and discuss it in a semi/unstructured way
- An informal follow-up interview with each dancer to discuss the documentary, screening party, and her overall experience with The Belly Dancer Project

In The Belly Dancer Project, I have allowed the methods to evolve organically in this way for many of the same reasons other feminist researchers have promoted their own respective research designs. Madriz argues her reasons for focus group research in this way:

> There are two main reasons why feminists have advanced the study of woman-centered topics through focus groups. These are first, the potential for the one-to-one interviewing practice to reproduce power relationships between the researcher and the participants, and second, the desire to lessen dichotomies that traditional research imposes between thought and feeling, personal and political, observed and observer, and between dispassionate/objective and passionate/subjective. Instead the focus is on giving a voice to the subjective experiences of women. Rather than looking at research linearly, as a one-way process, feminist researchers advocate accepting the contradictions and complexities found in their work, and emphasizing them as a primary goal (Madriz 2003).

If the reasons underlying the thousands of decisions in identifying, theorizing, designing, conducting, describing, analyzing, and understanding research

that empowers its participants, the resulting shape for each research program *must* emerge in radically different forms. Because if we follow Pollio's phenomenological mandate (1997) that method must arise from the same common concerns as the phenomenon of which it seeks to elucidate, the method itself – *meta*: across or beyond, and *hodos*: a path or way – is intrinsically bound to the phenomenon itself, if meaningful understandings are to be found.

This all said, it eventually becomes necessary to present non-linear, organically-ordered research in a way that can be read in a logical, temporal order, front-to-back. So in the pages and chapters to follow, it is my goal to bring some kind of order to the understandings that have been shaped theoretically (Research Question-1), and methodologically (Research Question-2). Due to the centrality of the desire to generate reflexive understandings about the methodology used to better understand the belly dance phenomenon, I have made the decision to structure chapters along methodological lines. This in and of itself is a weighty decision that has broad repercussions on the characteristics of analysis of the descriptions and understandings generated – and this strategy will be discussed in the Methodology chapter. At this point, it is perhaps enough for the reader to know that the following ordering decisions have been made:

Chapter 1: Introduction to The Belly Dancer Project

Chapter 2: The Gendered Identity Process

Chapter 3: A Documentary-Driven Methodology

Chapter 4: Belly Dance: Past(s) and Present

Chapter 5: Filmmaking as Phenomenological Discovery

Chapter 6: Interview as Open Microphone

Chapter 7: Performance as Identity Enactment

Chapter 8: Focus Groups as Shared Reflections

Chapter 9: Reflections and Conclusions

So with this, I invite you, the reader, to enter into The Belly Dancer Project as a full participant. Read the words. Watch the film. Experience the belly dance phenomenon and The Belly Dancer Project through the senses of the dancers. Experience the belly dance phenomenon and The Belly Dancer Project through the eyes of the researcher – me. Make your own judgments about the methodology I've used. Observe your own experience of watching the dancers on the television screen, of hearing their music as you watch them, and of reading our words on the pages you hold in your hand (or scroll through on your computer screen). How do your own past experiences, your own biases, and your own experiences of gender influence your experiences with this material? And most importantly, how does experiencing The Belly Dancer Project cause you to reflect on how you experience yourself?

Chapter 2

# THE GENDERED IDENTITY PROCESS

*RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?*

In The Belly Dancer Project, I am interested in looking into the identity process as it occurs within the individual belly dancer. This involves learning about how the belly dancer thinks and feels about herself and how she interacts with her environment – including her belly dance environment. It also involves observing the ways she reacts when she sees herself on tape, how she reacts to other belly dancers describing their own lived experiences, and the ways she reacts to other dancers discussing a film about her.

In order to better frame the incredibly complex and reflexive identity process I seek to document with this project, I feel it is necessary to first present an overview of literature addressing the conceptualizations of identity – and more specifically gender identity – in three primary areas. This chapter first charts the pertinent theoretical developments concerning gender identity in general. Second, it covers theories concerning voluntary female communities as these influence the identity development of the women who participate in them. Lastly, this chapter outlines important theories linking the lived experiences of the female body vis-à-vis identity. In this literary overview, I do not presume to address all sources relating to gender identity, gendered communities, or gendered bodily identity, but rather wish to present a broad enough background to frame the study at hand.

The first section traces prominent views on gendered identity throughout social science literature. It ranges from Marxist feminism to Poststructural views on

the subject. This is included in order to present a broad array of ways to conceive the subject of the first research question – *RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?* The subsequent section on gender identity and community reflects the fact that belly dance is a community activity. It is most often learned and shared in groups, and this fact greatly influences individuals' experiences of the phenomenon and of themselves in relation to the phenomenon. The third section on gendered identity and the body is included because belly dance is, by its nature, an overtly embodied phenomenon, and it is necessary to present different views on how to conceptualize this. One theme that meanders through this third section on gender identity and the body is that of essentialism within the feminist argument. This discussion is highlighted not because it is my own theoretical proclivity, but because I have found that belly dancers often develop their own notions of gendered identity politics around a more or less essentialist understanding.

This entire theoretical discussion of gendered identity resides within the overarching phenomenological approach that was outlined in the Introduction chapter. When taken holistically to inform both the theoretical and methodological developments of the research project, phenomenology provides a reflexive lens through which to examine all discourses that emerge in the gathering of data, and analyzing of trends, as they emerge. It encourages one to describe, in detail, all phenomena as they are observed/experienced by the researcher, which means describing all of the discourses that emerge from The Belly Dancer Project methodological collections and analysis as being the ways in which the belly dancers experience their worlds.

## Gendered Identities

*Materialist Approaches Incorporate Marx*

Social theory has traditionally taken a distinctly masculine slant, often completely ignoring the gendered aspects of whatever phenomena its framers theorize. Historically speaking, with her publication of *The Second Sex* (1997[1953]) Simone de Beauvoir was the first western philosophical feminist to formally protest this trend. She came out of the same strain of European Communism that inspired Jean Paul Sartre. As such, her work draws strongly from Marxism, but also existentialism, in its Neitzschean and Sartrean renditions (Shildrick and Price 1999), in answering the complex question of gendered identity, "What is a woman?" To de Beauvoir, a woman has been made the *other*, where men have always been the *one*, thus leaving women's identity completely out of the equation. She says, "No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself (herself) as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One, he (she) must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view" (1997: 14). From a historical materialist standpoint, she discusses how this domination came to be, and how reproductive differences have become what we think of as gender. Deigned *other* and marginalized as such, de Beauvoir claims that the female identity is largely influenced by an overarching masculinity within society and individual women's lives.

Picking-up de Beauvoir's infant biological component in 1970, Shulamith Firestone develops the first threads of radical and later cultural (or essentialist) feminism by asserting that in all historical time periods, biological and psychoanalytical differences have existed that caused the power imbalance between

men and women. This clearly impacts women's ability to fully form independent identities. Her intent was to take the dialectical historical materialism of Marx and meld it with the sexed unconscious yearnings proposed by Freud, postulating that though biology and psychology have historically placed women at a disadvantage, they do not necessarily preordain the future, or a woman's entire identity (1997[1970]: 19-26).

Also among these first Women's Liberation Movement theorists was Gayle Rubin, who in 1975 chose a structural anthropological-Marxist fusion to hypothesize how women understand themselves – or form an identity – through gendered oppression. She embraces Marxist analysis, but proposes that the political and sex/gender systems, as well as the traditional economic system need to be examined in order to achieve a complete picture of the historical forms of oppression and chart the progressing opportunities for identity construction (1997[1975]: 32-33). To do this, she incorporates structuralist anthropologist Levi-Strauss's kinship model in which women are used for their exchange value into the more purely Marxist evaluation that attributes women's social worth largely to their production and reproduction values.

*Radical Feminist Approaches Integrate Freud*

Radical feminist theory is intrinsically tied to Pierre Bourdieu's dynamic notion of *practice*. According to Bonnie Kreps in 1970, "Society's most potent tool for making female human beings into dependent adults is a socialization process" (Kreps 2003:46). Theories that incorporate this concept of practice fit nicely within the overarching phenomenological framework of The Belly Dancer Project because it helps to explain how people understand the world and themselves within it based

on their everyday embodied experience (practice) of moving through their world. The primary issue dividing radical feminists from other feminist theorists is what exactly constituted that practice, or real world experience. The majority of the 1970s feminist theorists writing about women's identity were middle- to upper- class white women who, in theorizing from their own practice, wrote as such, and as is so easy to do for any privileged class, wrote assuming that their experiences were shared by everyone else. This is where most of the biological (not discussed here) and psychoanalytical feminism get their roots; because biology and, to a large extent, Freudian theories focus on the differences between men and women, and assume that all (or most) people of one sex share some fundamental roots, and therefore create identities in similar ways. The theories make assumptions about not only lesbians, outlying women, and minority women in the United States, but about all women around the world. "In short, radical feminism is concerned with the analysis of the oppression of women as *women* (in all their incarnations). Its basic aim could fairly be stated as, 'there shall be no characteristics, behaviour, or roles ascribed to any human being on the basis of sex'" (italics in original, Kreps 2003:48).

Catherine MacKinnon (1997[1989]) is probably the most radical theorist of this era, in every sense of the word. Her primary focus is on role definition concerning gender and on the implicit power of those definitions. In MacKinnon's writings, male is synonymous with power and domination while female is synonymous with victim and submission, therefore all relationships are inherently unequal and all sex is rape. Identity is then shaped by this relationship. She vehemently attacks pornography and other cultural representations as perpetuating this relationship, claiming that the hegemony is inescapable – even in same-sex

relationships. "Anything women have claimed as their own – motherhood, athletics, traditional men's jobs, lesbianism, feminism – is made specifically sexy, dangerous, provocative, punished, made men's in pornography" (1997[1989]:167). This thus taints any ground upon which women can build an identity. Her strong voice came across as a powerful statement for radical feminists, yet because of the totality of her assertions, and the prevailing negativity, her stance proved difficult to form a platform upon.

This is where, in 1978, Nancy Chodorow (1997) stepped in and began an entire sub-genre of radical feminism employing the more pro-women object-relations theory, which focuses primarily on the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal (Freudian) stages and their impact on girls versus boys. She asserts that because women never completely sever the deep, pre-oedipal love of their mother when they transfer sexual feeling to their father, for the rest of their lives they look for completion of this mother-father-self triangle relationship in close relationships with female friends, their mother, lesbian lovers, or ultimately their own child when forming an identity. Men, on the other hand, are complete in their monogamous adult heterosexual relationships because they never had to transfer love away from the mother – their attention has been trained to concentrate on one woman instead of being divided (1997). Numerous feminist scholars adopted Chodorow's theory because of its focus on heterosexual relationships, its effects could be seen in everyday life, and it was a working theory that is easily malleable in several different directions.

One example is Carol Gilligan (1997[1982]), who in 1982 used it to speak out against the scientific methods used to evaluate women psychologically, educationally, and social developmentally (i.e., trying to pin down a female identity), stating that the

desirable values and qualities that the tests measure are all qualities that men naturally possess in larger amounts than do women, such as independence, confrontational, and rule-fixation as opposed to interdependence, compromise, and cooperation that are found in larger amounts among women. Therefore, the creation of a positive gendered identity for women was still undertheorized (1997[1982]).

*Standpoint Theories – Feminist Theory Blends Freud and Marx*

Nancy Hartsock (2003[1983]) birthed a theoretical genre known as standpoint theory, which such notable theorists as Patricia Hill Collins (2003[2000]), and others such as Donna Haraway (1999) have followed. Like those in the radical feminist appropriation of psychoanalysis, Hartsock began with Chodorow's theory and developed it instead into a standpoint theory. These theories concentrate on individual perspective: "(a) standpoint… carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible" (Hartsock 2003[1983]:292). Concerning views of individual identity, this implies that one forms her identity in part based on intrinsic aspects of her relationship with the world that are not accessible by others. As one might think, standpoint theory also has Marxist influences, owing to it the unique view of the underclass, which can never be fully understood by the capitalists (or the undergender, which can never be fully understood by men). Hartsock examines the sexual division of labor in Western countries, looking at the things men and women pride in their work, and looks at the results of monotonous repetition that characterizes women's household duties. Using Chodorow's triangle theory, she honors women and therefore their identity formation for their relational jobs: in the title role they take in biologically

growing and raising the children, and in the holistic connection between their bodies and the outside world that such daily work provides. Alternatively, because of the nature of men's work, she claims that men are conditioned to develop a vision centering on classes and society, whereas women, through their experiences, can provide a much broader and holistic worldview (2003).

Patricia Hill Collins followed in the standpoint tradition, agreeing with Hartsock that one's experiences as a member of particular social, racial, ethnic, sexual, and other groups form a unique view and a unique identity. However, instead of insisting that any one of these matrixed perspectives – Hartsock's white dominant perspective or from her own black feminist one – be meaningfully insightful in its own right, Collins urges theorists to bring their theories together, to interact with one another and form a community vision (or community identity) that truly represents these groups in their combined complexity (2003[2000]). This marks her work as the beginning of intersectionality theories.

*Bourdieu on Gender*

Bourdieu says that, "every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness" (parentheses in original – 1977:164). This sense of (arbitrary) reality is upheld by not only the dominating class (or gender), but by all others as well, because that reality (including such elements as class and gender roles) are not only taught, or embodied, but completely internalized (1977). From this reasoning, Bourdieu constructed his theory on gendered bodies and identities in *Masculine Domination*. According to this text,

> The particular strength of the masculine sociodicy comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: it (1) legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is (2) itself a naturalized social construction (numbering added -- Bourdieu 2001:22).

Bourdieu continues to apply his holistic approach when addressing the concept of *symbolic violence*. "Symbolic force is a form of power that is exerted on bodies, directly and as if by magic, without any physical constraint; but this magic works only on the basis of the dispositions deposited, like springs, at the deepest level of the body" (2001:38). As opposed to overt violence that is acknowledged and dealt with by a society, symbolic violence is thought to be built into the societal structures, and perpetuated by *habitus* (which is an ensemble of long-enduring, culturally-transposable dispositions that inscribe in people taken-for-granted assumptions and limitations about their objective world). This objective world and its habitus structures are all continually reproduced through *practice* – particularly by those with the most symbolic capital. As he describes the mechanisms behind different forms of violence (focusing on symbolic), we begin to understand why this notion has achieved such widespread appropriation (and/or reappropriation) by feminist theorists interested in the more invisible forms of domination to women (Skeggs 2004, Butler 2003, and others associated with poststuructural approaches).

> Symbolic violence, the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen, the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety…cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination, …(whereas)…gentle exploitation is much more costly – and not just in economic terms (certainly in terms of identity construction) – for those who practice it (Bourdieu, 1994:186-187).

So in other words, symbolic violence is woven into the everyday lived experiences of all individuals through habitus. The phenomenological terms of The Belly Dancer Project, each individual dancer – from her unique perspective – interacts (via *practice*) with her life-world that is in fact a dynamically changing net of *habitus* values, norms, and behaviors, and is shaped largely through the invisible *symbolic violence* of the ongoing perpetuation of existing power structures.

*Poststructural Feminism and the Self*

In feminist theory, poststructuralism can be seen as an extension of the theories exploring the individual's segmentation begun in the standpoint writing discussed above. Where the structural, psychoanalytical model assumes a unified subject, poststructuralism directly attacks that unified subject. The implications this has for identity construction are widespread. Where in standpoint theory identity is based upon a matrix of multiplicity that though complex, can at least be related to others, poststructuralism implies that each individual has a different worldview that can never be compared to anyone else's. Nothing – not experience, or past, or definitions, and certainly not categorical similarities such as gender, sex, race, or social class – can be assumed as unifying or shared. Judith Butler provides an archetypal poststructuralist response to a request for lesbian writing,

> I'm not at ease with "lesbian theories, gay theories," for as I've argued elsewhere, identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a libratory contestation of that very oppression (1997:301).

On one side, this de-centering of subject and individualization of theory is liberating in terms of understanding identity. On the other, any unification of a social

movement is trivialized and any shared position is negated, which discourages any sense of community among women.

Butler begins her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution…" by responding to Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" – a claim in itself heavily influenced by the Marxist and existential theoretical schools as discussed in previous sections (Butler 2003). Into her response to Beauvoir's question, she incorporates elements of the phenomenological claim that social agents should be seen as objects rather than subjects (Merleau-Ponty 1962 – this theory is discussed below under the section, *Identity and the Body*). From this base, Butler builds a theoretical case that the notion of gender itself is unstable as a foundation for agency, but gender is instead an identity instituted over time through a repeated set of corporeal acts (Butler 2003). The following quote encapsulates this view:

> Apart from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term 'women' denotes a common identity….If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections which it is invariably produced and maintained (Butler 1999:6).

To give this poststructural argument perspective, Linda Alcoff, in 1988 says:

> Briefly put, then, the cultural feminist response to Simone de Beauvoir's question, "Are there women?" is to answer yes and to define women by their activities and attributes in the present culture. The poststructuralist response is to answer no and attack the category and the concept of woman through problematizing subjectivity (1997:331).

Her response is that both perspectives are flawed and a new synthesis avoiding the pitfalls of both is being developed. This synthesis manifests itself in what is called positionality.

**Gender Identity and Community**

Most, if not all, social theorists agree that because humans are social beings, identity is not formed in isolation, but depends upon the influences of others. They (of course) disagree upon when, how, and in what ways these influences interact with the subject to form an identity, and also disagree upon whom and what constitutes the influencing others. A sampling of these disagreements is the subject of this portion of the chapter.

*The Sociological Symbolic Interaction Lens*

Sociologist George Herbert Mead, in 1934, published *Mind, Self, and Society*, in which he placed an emphasis on the associated interactions among these respective named entities (Ritzer 1996). Like Simmel before him, Mead sees the society as preexisting the mind and self (together, roughly equated with identity). The individual mind arises through the social processes, and is defined functionally, as a process that engages in dialogue with the self, and is able to then interact with the overall community. The self is defined by Mead processually as the continual social process between the *I* and the *me*. The me is the generalized other within the self, or the imagined response of the other to imagined planned acts – in other words, the *me* is the, "organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (Ritzer 1996:345). The *I* aspect of the self is what allows for innovation and creativity in the model. It is never truly experienced, but evidence of its existence is seen in

memories. The *I* comments on *me*, relates those internalized impressions of society to the innermost values and self-realization potential contained in the *I*, and provides a novel response, which is then "discussed" with the mind and transmitted to the outside community (Meltzer, et. al 1975).

According to Herbert Blumer (who coined the term symbolic interactionism and helped to codify and methodologically apply Mead's theory), interactionism has three basic tenets. First, individuals act toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them. Secondly, these meanings come about through social interaction in human society. And thirdly, these meanings are individually internalized, modified, and handled through an interactive process at the individual level, and this interactive practice continues to be internalized from the process of social interaction and forms the identity (Blumer 1969).

For the purpose of this discussion, the most important theory emerging directly out of the symbolic interactionism, or Chicago School, was that of Erving Goffman. To understand Goffman's contribution, we need to remember that the entire symbolic interactionist thread of theory, since Mead, incorporates a notion of individual identity that is in constant and direct contact (interaction) with the social world. In 1959 Goffman published *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which incorporates Mead's concept of the self as active and knowledgeable, in constant interaction with itself and with society. Goffman's approach to the self and its identities is through its performances in everyday life. By examining individuals' strategies for impression management in both public (front stage) times and private (back stage) times, it is possible to better understand the self and its associated identities (1959). Goffman's theory revolves around a theatrical stage-based analogy,

in which the self is differentially performed (and its identities are seen), depending on its positioning in the front or back stage regions of the stage, and based on its audience. Strategic props, scenery, body language, and speech are all employed to present different aspects of the self in a successful performance.

The theories in this section thus far have been primarily concerned with the microsocial interactions, and the performance of the self (or identities) to the world. This focus on the individual vis-à-vis society posited by the symbolic interactionist models produces several notable theoretical strengths. These include the relatively shallow scope of generalization to larger units of analysis or abstraction levels that they allow, and the situational nature in which identities and society are linked so that the self/identities and all understandings about them are temporally and spatially bound (Meltzer 1975). Notice also that through these theories a general theme can be derived: the individual identity is so enmeshed within the social and physical environment that whenever a theorist modifies the conception of the individual, the conception of the environment (including its functions, qualities, and its relationship with the individual) changes inversely.

*Psychology and Social Identity*

One of the first psychologists to address the issue of identity as an independent construct was Erik Erikson (1974). His framework involves distinguishing the continuity-conceived ego (or self), from the idiosyncratic personal identity, as well as from the cultural and social roles known as social identity or cultural identity (1974).

Similarly, Henri Tajfel (1981) and others have differentiated between two forms of identity. The first involves individual personality traits and interpersonal

relationships which, following from Erikson, is typically called personal identity. The second incorporates elements of a person's identity that result from belonging to certain groups, and is called social identity – in an application also similar to Erikson's. For many people, a positive self-esteem is gained through identification with one or more groups, which further their sense of community and belonging, and strengthen a positive social identity. Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory coalesces this process of self-categorization and explains how simply creating in-groups and out-groups leads people to act in a discriminating way in their own (social and personal) identity construction.

When arguing the importance of community belonging in individual identity development, Jolanda Jetten and Tom Postmes assert that theories such as these, which incorporate the notion of social identity should weigh heavily in the discussion. By speculating that the individual group/community member incorporates central group characteristics into her/his identity, the individual is able to act as a member of the group even in isolation (Jetten and Postmes 2006:2). But at a certain point, the extension of social identity must be understood to self-regulate, so that personal identity is not entirely swept away by social or collective identity. Deborah Prentice answers the fundamental question about how an individual can retain an individual identity while immersing herself in a collective or group. She believes that the two identities run in parallel; actions and feelings are divided, and individuals feel themselves to be individuals while *acting* as group members (1999).

*Anthropology of Identity, Culture, and Society*

Coming from a social anthropological standpoint, Fredrik Barth (1969) and many others relate identity strongly to ethnicity. This sense of identity or self is seen

to be formed largely through an awareness of distinctiveness or difference from the other. This approach draws attention to the fact that ethnic groups are socially constructed phenomena, but also severely limits the concept of identity to ethnic constructs and affiliations.

Through the following years, identity came to be seen in anthropological and cultural studies circles closer to the ways it is seen in sociological and political science circles. Situating identity socially, Stuart Hall (1996) links a search for identity to a search for one's roots. This argument quickly dissolves into a politics of difference rather than a search for identity. However, Hall and his followers are some of the biggest proponents for treating identity as a process rather than a reified condition. And that necessarily means taking into account an individual's ever-changing experiences into the identity make-up of that individual.

As social beings, all humans look for markers when understanding and describing the identities of others. Identity itself is malleable, volatile, incoherent, and constantly changing. However, when studying the nebulous identity process, we can describe identity markers such as language use, dress, body language, behavior, etc. That is why, in The Belly Dancer Project, I am able to use video interviews and video performances to capture the identity markers of four featured dancers, and then have other dancers view and react verbally to these markers, in an attempt to get the viewers to reflect upon their own experiences of the identity process vis-à-vis belly dance. This was done in the focus groups, where viewers were asked to view the documentary showcasing four featured dancers and their countless identity markers (many of which are intelligible only to other belly dancers), and then discuss topics associated with identity. Because The Belly Dancer Project is about a

community/group phenomenon, this methodological step is a very important way to generate understandings about social and personal identity. In addition, this step was added in order to: generate feedback (from members of the belly dance phenomenon) on the way I have portrayed the featured dancers, to allow the featured dancers to view and reflect upon the on-screen portrayal of themselves discussing/performing identity with the support of their belly dance peers, and to allow the focus group members to reflect upon their own identities vis-à-vis the belly dance phenomenon (as it is portrayed on-screen and as it is experienced with the other focus group participants).

*An Ethnographic Look at Women's Communities*

One of the peculiarities of the belly dance phenomenon is its curious combination of private women's spaces with public exhibition. However, whereas the performative aspects of the phenomenon contribute greatly to individual physical presentation of self and identity expression via fairly overt identity markers, I have found that many attributes of the phenomenon associated with the community itself retain properties typically seen in cloistered women's spaces. I believe that even as the belly dance community exemplifies themes seen in such women's communities as women's poker groups (Tutt 1989), women's literary communities (Butling 2002), and women's church groups (Montovani 1982), perhaps the best example of the shared women's space commonalities lies in the unlikely analogy between the belly dance community and the quilters' community.

Like belly dance, quilting in America experienced a large popularity surge in the 1970s by women looking for a creative outlet with connections to tradition, but, scholars theorize that it (quilting) has maintained its popularity due to the strong

sense of belonging and group identity (Langellier 1990). Both communities are dominated by Anglo-American women of wide age and income disparities. The majority of women in quilting communities identify with the activity in terms of an overarching feminine culture, that creates, "a fellowship with women of all ages from which inspiration flows," and a nurturing atmosphere that empowers the individual (Cerny 1991:37) – very similar sentiments to those expressed by belly dancers. Quilters' guilds serve as private spaces for women's talk and communion over a creative activity that is particularly powerful for homemakers, retirees with large amounts of discretionary time, mothers working multiple jobs, unpopular teens, overly-shy women, and others who have diminished opportunities for social interaction – all of these (if in slightly different ratios) are also common characteristics of belly dance participants. Both communities promote alternative models for powerful femininity. In quilters' communities, one researcher notes,

> (there is) a profound absence of concern with the youth and beauty culture of the female body – the decorated, dieted, exercised body of feminine display that constructs contemporary femininity...coupled with the quiltmaking's enablement of aging women, suggests in another way the empowering femininity of quiltmaking which features women's creative production..." (Langellier 1990:51).

This corresponds to the belly dance community's ideals of creativity, ingenuity, strength, and skill – in dancing, choreography, musicality, and costume making. And while belly dance communities are certainly spectacular subcultures (Hebdige 1979) that are driven by embodied aesthetics, this aesthetic is described by every dancer I have met as being an ability to move and adorn one's body with grace, skill, and creativity appropriate to the shape of that person's body. In other words,

the belly dance community holds-up as its notion of beauty, the moving embodied artistry of the dancer over the hegemonic western (static) images of thin youth.

**Gender Identity and the Body**

In the phenomenological tradition of Merleau-Ponty, the subject's being-in-the-world is intricately connected to, and is an extension, of the body itself. Furthermore, the structure of the subject (loosely equivalent to the self, or the identity) is inseparable from its corporeal capacities (Shildrick and Price 1999). This theoretical framework is rooted in an understanding that there is an oft-unrecognized, preexisting space within every binary pair, such as the space between mind and body, between subject and object, between self and other, and between masculine and feminine. And because the dualistic Cartesian model is so pervasively hegemonic to western logic as to become integral to the perpetuation of most forms of symbolic violence, conceiving identity in alternative terms radically throws all other assumptions into question. Therefore, if the phenomenological exercise of The Belly Dancer Project is to be undertaken, the first step is to destabilize any existing hegemonies rooted in these black-and-white binaries. In Elizabeth Grosz's words,

> Merleau-Ponty locates experience at the midpoint between mind and body. He links the question of experience not only to the privileged locus of consciousness, but demonstrates that experience is always, necessarily embodied, corporeally constituted, located in and as the subject's incarnation (Grosz 1999:149).

Taking-up this phenomenological line of thinking profoundly affects the way that one views identity. Just as in the symbolic interactionist camp, identity is mapped to reside between the self and society in the Merleau-Ponty model; the individual understands and is understood to reside between the mental and embodied experiences, between subjectivity and objectivity, etc. In the following

discussion of identity and the body, many different theorists are reviewed, but all agree that one's individually embodied experiences profoundly affect one's identity process.

*The Gendered Body – Psychology's Influence*

Writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, Freud was influential in radically destabilizing the notion of the centered subject. He proposed that most of what initially forms the individual as a social being, and continues to shape one's behaviors and sense of self (i.e., identity) throughout one's life, is biologically/sexually determined and located in the unconscious – and as such, is almost completely inaccessible (Elliot 1999). This theoretical leap had the effect of causing theorists to question the cognizant, *thinking* subject's agency in her/his identity development, as had previously been assumed. Influencing Merleau-Ponty and countless others, Freud was one of the first to bridge the Cartesian gap between mind and body.

Elizabeth Grosz restates this concisely as, "(b)iology must be understood as psychologically pliable. If anything, a two-way determination or overdetermination, a clear interaction of the biological and psychological, is forged in (Freud's) writings" (1994:28). Freud theorized this interaction by analyzing the infantile experiences of what he saw to be the universal nuclear family (Marcuse 1999). Instinctive desires for pleasure and self-preservation in early childhood stages are differentially met and/or denied by the mother and father, and the child learns to repress these desires so that they come to reside in the unconscious. Physiological differences between male and female children result in different types of identifications with the mother and father, a process leading to the reproduction of gender (a point that is weakened

substantially when extrapolated to non-traditional families). Freudian theory is specifically important to the development of understanding the gendered identity process as it was the first to propose that the biological differences between men and women are mediated by the unconscious and unfulfilled desires that took place in infancy and early childhood (Callinicos 1999).

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is often characterized as a poststructuralist because he first appeared on the map in the 1950s by adopting a Saussurian linguistic framework to expand on Freudian psychoanalytical theory. Lacan employed Saussure's linguistic framework to map the unconscious, a move that detaches the subject from any biological, social, or cognitive stabilizing forces and allows for an even more radically decentered subject – or a fading subject – than was theorized by Freud (Elliot 1999). According to Lacanian theory, "The disappearance of the subject is connected to the movement of the unconscious which eludes capture within language and which is located beneath the networks and chains of the signifier in an 'indeterminate place'" (McNay 2000). His framework goes so far as to theorize the body as an imaginary anatomy which first arises in the mirror stage of development at around six-months of age, when a child first recognizes her reflection in the mirror, and learns to distinguish certain parts of this image as internal to her *self* and fixed to her body[2]. Here he has been quoted as saying,

> The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his powers is given to him only as Gestalt, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size that fixes it and in a symmetry that

[2] Lacan would have been more likely to employ the masculine pronoun here, but as this theory applies to all humans and has been taken-up by a number of feminist theorists, I have chosen to use the female pronoun.

> inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him (Grosz 1994:42).

The Lacanian progression of thought is particularly influential as it presents the first theory to propose the notion of the unified self (and consequently identity) as an alienating fiction and that the other is located within the self by the process of believing that the self is what is reflected back by the social world (Lacan 1999; Elliot 1999).

In these psychoanalytic models, one key point is most important to note. In attributing the core of identity to an inaccessible and troubled unconscious, Freud made the first radical decentering of the subject. When this theoretical shift was combined with Saussure's radicalization of the signifier/signified relationship and the synthesized methodological tools (psychoanalytic and linguistic) for accessing the unconscious, the door was opened to a hitherto unimagined conceptualizing of the self.

Corporeal feminists draw heavily on psychoanalytic theories to stress the importance of early sex and gender identifications with caregivers in influencing most subsequent developments of gender identity at a largely unconscious level (see for example, Chodorow 1997, Grosz 1994, Irigaray 1999, 1997, Kristeva 1999). In this way, Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic concepts have been taken up by poststructural feminist theorists to help explain decentered subjectivity. These theorists do so by recognizing that the *I* is in fact an alienating misrecognition which masks the fragmented nature of the unconscious (Elliot 1999). This notion of decentered subjectivity is important to understanding embodied gender relations because it allows for differences in identity resulting from the differences in sexed

bodies without having to account for those differences through inherent differences between men and women (however those categories are defined), which is the marker for the essentialist-rooted theories discussed below (Nicholson 1997).

For example, Julia Kristeva begins with the Lacanian alienated self, and reintroduces into the model, the dynamic pre-Oedipal drives (which she terms the semiotic) so central to Freudian thought. This helps to free the subject and the other (society) from fixed, predetermined relationships (Kristeva 1999). Also drawing from the Lacanian psychoanalysis frame, Irigaray departs from his basic premise that gender identity is formed phallocentrically – actively for males, and passively (or, in Kristeva's writing, circumcisionally) for females. When identity is equated with the identification with one's sexual organs, Irigaray argues, masculine identity evolves into one of focused, linear, subjectivity, rationality, and dominance (1997). Women's experience of their sexuality is diffuse, their pleasure is diversified, they are thought to also see themselves as more nebulous, and in a less focused, linearly-oriented way than men. By linking the self so closely to an individual's psychosexual interpretations of her world, Irigaray sets up an inherent decenteredness in the female identity. "'She' is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious – not to mention her language in which 'she' goes off in all directions in which 'he' is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (1997:326). Therefore,

> Woman would always remain multiple, but she would be protected from dispersion because the other is a part of her, and is autoerotically familiar to her... Nearness…is not foreign to woman, a nearness so close that any identification of one or the other, and therefore any form of property, is impossible. Woman enjoys a closeness with the other that is so near she cannot possess it, any more than she can possess herself. She constantly trades herself for

> the other without any possible identification of either one of them (Irigaray 1997:328 italics in original).

Irigaray concludes that it is through the resulting symbolic ordering from the sexual development of identity, that women are relegated to developing diffuse identity seen as emotionality, objectivity, and submission.

*Identity and the Female Body: Essentialist and Inessential Identities*

> However alienated male-dominated culture makes us from our bodies, however much it gives us instruments of self-hatred and oppression, still our bodies are ourselves. We move and act in this flesh and these sinews, and live our pleasures and pains in our bodies. If we love ourselves at all, we love our bodies (Young 2003:154).

This section is situated around the essentialist debate concerning the female body and identity. Most feminist scholars eschew this theoretical stance that is founded upon the assumption that biologically, psychologically, and in every other sense ("Mars vs. Venus" arguments, etc.), women are fundamentally or essentially different from men. Theorists in this school tend to discredit any theoretical arguments that don't take an embodied supposition at their core.

Essentialism also creates a much larger oppositional contingency of theorists who use essentialism as a perjorative word. This is due to the central claims posed by poststructuralism, Marxism, symbolic interactionism, etc. that one cannot take such a widespread, diverse segment of people (biological females), and make homogeneous, a-historical assumptions about them due to their physiology. In addition to these sweeping disagreements, there are of course other nuances to this theoretical and political debate, which will be discussed below.

The reason why I have chosen to discuss theories of the body based on an essentialist touch point in this section is that much of the belly dancing popular and

academic literature either exhibits essentialist tendencies, or outright labels itself as essentialism. Specifically, cultural feminism, an essentialist theory, goes further to state that women are biologically superior to men; and spiritual feminism involves essentialist beliefs that incorporate woman-centered religious elements such as paganism or witchcraft. But the most important reason for this theoretical discussion follows the grounded findings that most of the dancers in The Belly Dancer Project speak in essentialist terms about their experiences with the belly dance phenomenon.

Christine Battersby engages this debate by contributing a model in which the, "body-boundaries do not *contain* the self; they *are* the embodied self" (italics in original, Battersby 1999:355). In this she states that it is not necessary to essentialize a specifically female experience of the body. Instead she says that it is possible to move beyond deconstructivist notions of male-dominated western science and philosophy to explore new understandings of the mind/body, or form/matter relationships. This allows for a theorizing of a real which is, "beyond the universals of an imagination or a language that takes the male body and mind as ideal and/or norm" (1999:357). In this, Battersby is trying to move beyond the straightforward essentialist/anti-essentialist debate, to develop theory that incorporates the embodied experiences of men and women (and certainly is not sponsored by systems taking the embodied male experience as the standard), but allows for individual differences among women, and allows for more interaction between the body and the mind.

Similarly, Linda Alcoff argues that social identities are not only relational and contextual, but fundamental to the self. They are shaped by an individual's roles and positions (such as parent), and by essential characteristics (such as race and sex).

These social identities then occupy a position not only in relation to one's relationship to the other, but they are

> profoundly significant in determining the state of the 'world' (or worlds) that each individual inhabits: whether they experience that world as hospitable, friendly, judgmental, skeptical, intrusive, or cold. Habits of expectation are engendered by patterns of experience, and in this way is created our unique self (Alcoff 2006:91).

She argues that identity classifications of intrinsic/non-intrinsic, and essential/inessential confuse the understanding of the nature of the self, yet she argues that maintaining the distinction between the interior and exterior of the self may remain useful as we discuss one's lived subjectivity and her public identity.

By this Alcoff means that the public identity is our, "socially perceived self within the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community in which we live" (2006:92-93). This is contrary to a lived subjectivity, "that is not always perfectly mapped onto our socially perceived self, and that can be experienced and conceptualized differently" (93). In other words, lived subjectivity refers to that who we understand ourselves to be, and incorporates embodied experiences. Thinking in terms of the interior and exterior aspects of the self encourages one to think of the interior being separable or cut-off from the external social world. This begins to lean in the direction of essentialism, as the existence of a stable interior being can be seen to be rooted in sexed biology, but is balanced by a public identity that is constantly changing.

The problem with essentialism, claims Samantha Holland (2004) who researches alternative femininities, is the, "idea that femininity equates with young, white, slim, heterosexual, able-bodied women," and that a singular descriptive terms of femininity and gender should be replaced with femininities and genders. To think

in terms of these pluralities allows for a taking into account differences in age, ethnicity, class, and body size. In this, she argues against the singular, static notion of woman often created by essentialist positions.

Susan Bordo discusses the fact that women are presented with standardized visual images as models for identity development.

> As a result, femininity itself has come to be largely a matter of constructing, in the manner described by Erving Goffman, the appropriate surface presentation of the self. We no longer are told what "a lady" is or of what femininity consists. Rather, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images which tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behavior is required (Holland 2004:10).

Bordo sees the body not only as a medium of culture, as Mary Douglas argues, but also as a locus of social control, as is proposed by Bourdieu and Foucault. She asserts that the body is the product of how we treat it, with food, dress, as well as the daily rituals attending it, making it a surface for rules and hierarchies. It is also made, as Foucault states, through daily rituals from table manners to toilet practices, converted into automatic, habitual activity and put, according to him, "beyond the grasp of consciousness…(untouchable) by voluntary, deliberate transformations" (Bordo 2003:165).

In Bordo's view, essentializing women is not the answer, as she positions herself against anything static or fixed, as essentialist theory often exhibits. She agrees with Foucault that the body is in the grip of a life-long power struggle, and that bodies are made by those power relationships. In contrast, Foucault emphasizes the power of practice over belief. It is the specific regulation of time, space, and movement within our daily lives, and not our particular ideologies, that we train and

shape our bodies, impressing upon them the historical forms of selfhood, desire, and gender (Bordo 2003). According to Bordo's interpretation,

> For Foucault, modern power (as opposed to sovereign power) is non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated; yet it none the less produces and normalises bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination (Bordo 1999:252 – parentheses in original).

From this theory, it is easy to see why a conceptual similarity is sometimes drawn to Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence (Skeggs 2004). Bordo argues that over time, female bodies have become more docile – "habituated to external regulation, subjugation, transformation, 'improvement'" (Bordo 2003:166). And it is through these regulations and daily disciplines that our bodies memorize the feeling of a lack of conviction, of insufficiency, and inadequacy. She goes on to say that it is only this Foucaultian discipline or gender oppression that occurs across age, race, class, and sexual orientation, and must be seen as an incredibly durable and flexible form of social control. This is obviously not an essentialist view of the body – quite the opposite. In this line of argument the body is produced by the forms of power that mold it.

Iris Marion Young argues that, "many of the observed differences between men and women in the performance of tasks requiring coordinated strength are due not so much to brute muscular strength as to the way each sex *uses* the body in approaching tasks" (Alcoff 206:106). The bodily image reflects not only tacit knowledge of the body, but also a perceptual orientation and conceptual mapping that determines the values, relevance, and imaginable possibilities of the body (Alcoff 2006).

In "Mirror Mirror," Marcia Ann Gillespie describes the experience many women have with their bodies in relation to the outside world, or mirror.

> You are either too short or too tall, too fat or too thin. Your eyes aren't the shape, size or color that is considered beautiful. Your hair doesn't blow in the wind, or drape on your shoulder, or fluff out on the pillow. You have too much butt or too little. You worry because you have skinny legs or thunder thighs, 32A's or 36DD's. You worry about gravity sending nipples downward, about time and wrinkles, stretch marks and cellulite (Gillespie 2003:203).

In Gillespie's anti-essentialist position, the mirror represents one's self-concept which is indirectly felt by the individual seeing or imagining a mirroring object, and her body being reflected back on her. In this view that harkens back to both Lacan, and Mead, the imagined self becomes more important to the identity formation than the body itself. This is typical of the symbolic interactionist camp, in that the individual is continually constituted by society and its more individual imagined counterparts. It is also typical of Marxist feminism, as she emphasizes the ways that capitalists encourage these distorted mirrors in order to create need (demand).

According to Mimi Schippers (2002), who researches women in the hard rock genre,

> When bodies and bodily practices are placed within the ongoing process of gender structuration in situated social relations, they become rather significant in the gender order….not only do our bodies display gender, but the gender order gets reproduced and depends upon how the embodied identity labels *woman* and *man* set up a relationship between masculinity and femininity (2002:106).

She goes on to say that the clothing, makeup, and hairstyles women are expected to wear emphasize sexual attractiveness in the ways that they reveal the body, thus emphasizing youth and reproducing the hegemonic ideals of the feminine as sexual object. Thus, "style is one of the main signifiers of gender identity and a central

mechanism of what Judith Butler calls *the myth of gender coherence*" (italics in original, Shippes 2002:107).

Alcoff speaks about how identity, more than subjectivity or selfhood, implies a bodily difference. For example, both race and sex are social identities: physical, marking the body, determining material experience, visible as surface phenomena, and determinant of economic and social status, and as such, they cannot be discussed without a central recognition of the body (2006).

The issue of essentialism – after reading all of these theoretical accounts either attacking it or declaring the entire issue invalid and passé – may seem a strange point upon which to structure a section. However, as Gayatri Spivak states (1997[1989]), essentialism as it is taken-up by feminists is not a theoretical issue, but a strategy: for instance, pagan feminists arguing for matriarchal subcultures use essentialism in a very different way than do masochistic proponents of essentialism doing so in order to support "women give birth equals women stay in the kitchen" arguments. In this, Spivak means that strategic essentialism entails a persistent critique of those theories that would move to dismiss the embodied sexual differences while maintaining a continuous recognition of the dangers that essentialism's simplicity offers. If essentialism is taken as a strategy, one needs to always keep in mind the group using it for their purposes, in order to judge its usage – and to not forget how easy it is to be reappropriated to further patriarchal aims. In addition it has been argued by Spivak and others that essentialism does not belong with these philosophical theories for other reasons. In this way, the pro-essentialist accounts I will be referencing in the chapters to come do not belong with most of the more esoteric arguments of this section,

> Because essentialism is a loose-tongued phrase, not a philosophical school…Is essentialism a code word for a feeling for the empirical, sometimes? Even as antiessentialism is sometimes no more than an emphasis on the social? Why is the thought of the social free of essences (Spivak 1997:361)?

We need to see white middleclass women's identities in relation to Hispanic, poor, lesbian, (and other) women's identities, and how the interplay shapes each. "We have still to recognize that all women do not have the same gender" (Brown 1997:276). This raises the issue that we may lose the strength of a gendered identity argument, but in fact it draws us away from the potentially resulting reification of gender that a women's identity would produce. In other words, a generalized women/gender argument often is told from the perspective of – and therefore privileges – white, middleclass, educated women's voices.

*Theory in Action: Body Image, Identity, and Belly Dance*

The impact of belly dance on the embodied experience (including identity development and body image) draws together implications discussed in all of the gendered identity thematic sections thus far discussed in this chapter.

> (The body) is the condition and context through which I am able to have a relation to others...I am not able to stand back from the body and its experiences to reflect on them; this withdrawal is unable to grasp my body-as-it-is-lived-by-me. I have access to knowledge of my body only by living it (Grosz 1994:84).

Whether there is definitive evidence of a "hegemonic representation of a colonial fantasy" (Dox 1997:152), or a jumbled postmodern pastiche of styles embedded in American belly dance tradition through costuming and dance movements, the dancers physically/literally wear the resulting identity image. Women in belly dance communities experience and interact with each other as embodied beings. They experience the physical sensations of the movements, and they adorn and present

themselves physically to an audience (even an audience of other belly dancers, their mirror, or the video camera). Therefore every evidential nugget and thick descriptive passage produced in this study is combined to better understand how women experience the phenomenon of belly dancing from the perspective of their embodied individual identities.

I have foreshadowed this discussion enough for the reader to predict that there are several sub-themes within the belly dance body image theoretical discussion that I plan to address in the remainder of this chapter and/or the chapters to follow. These themes include: the belly dancers' use of costuming in identity construction and the trend towards purchasable identities that the emphasis on costumes presents; the effects of belly dance performance on individual body image; the individual reactions to the physical sensations of the movement; and the women's responses to the belly dance phenomenon's novel norms concerning appropriate body exposure and ideal body type. Literature and study results yield rich justification for each of these sub-themes, and much space in the analysis chapters is devoted to describing how these themes have appeared in The Belly Dancer Project. So here, I will take a couple of paragraphs to introduce readers to these complex embodied identity negotiations by discussing just one small aspect of this phenomenon – the individual negotiation of the bared-belly norm.

In contrast to the recent, transient fashions encouraging young women to bare their midriffs in "low-rise" pants resting at the hip bone, and shirts rising above the navel thus establishing the sliver of belly as the current erogenous zone of choice, the belly dancer's characteristic uncovered stomach has long been caught up in the dialectic of maternalism versus eroticism. This is discussed in chapter four as

the, *belly dancer as harem sex symbol/ belly dancer as ancient earth mother* thematic split seen within the belly dance literature. A good analogy for the conflicting symbolism of the bared belly can be seen in Cahill and Riley's (2001) discussion of women and body art:

> Visibility of body art can be understood both in terms of the symbiotic relationship between sexual objectification of women and women's celebration of their sexuality. For example, a belly-button piercing can be seen as part of society's objectification of the midriff, but also reclaiming the belly as part of a woman's sensuality (Cahill and Riley 2001:152).

Intentionally drawing attention to the belly, learning how to move it in a dozen ways, then showcasing it as something to take pride in, is a definite departure from traditional Western conceptions of the belly. Within the belly dance phenomenon, the sensual is neither denied nor emphasized, and the line between aesthetic and erotic is only dotted.

Because bare midriffs in American culture are currently reserved for the young, and are often sexualized in the media even then, it may be difficult for many new dancers to come to terms with the practice. First, a dancer is battling her own notions of how a "presentable" belly should look. According to Dox,

> In many ways, the movements of Middle Eastern dance develop a dancer's body against the preferred Western "look." Middle Eastern dance encourages the abdominal muscles to expand, even to relax downward with gravity to ripple the flesh of the midriff. The movements develop a rounded belly and flesh around the hips, which are an aesthetic focus of the dance (1997:154).

So a new dancer begins by accepting the bodies of the women around her – assessing their skill levels against the shapes of their bodies – and adapting to their practice of midriff baring. If she continues to dance, she will probably begin to look at her own body with these new criteria. "Belly dancing in the West thus demands a

reconceptualization of the western body in which excess flesh is not read as a sign of over-consumption to be corrected, but of physical freedom to be enjoyed" (Dox 1997:154). Then while the dancer is coming to terms with her body in terms of the aesthetics of the belly dance community, she is also reconciling her body with the expectations and judgments she anticipates from other people – be they friends and family she tells about her dance, or a future audience she imagines dancing for. These myriad looking glass selves (first introduced by symbolic interactionist Charles Cooley, Callinicos 1999), she can't forget, have not been socialized into the belly dance community, so will judge her against their ideas of a presentable body.

It follows that to the fledgling dance performer it is perhaps her expectations of the audience that are the most enigmatic and frightening. As a performer, offering herself as a mix of cultural symbols, and mindful of the stereotypes surrounding each, she might ask herself who her audience sees her as, and if she is acceptably embodying that identity. This type of corporeal insecurity is not novel to belly dancers, but in their case merely contains a further complication because as I have discussed in the previous sections, women have historically equated body type with self-confidence and physical attractiveness (Kaiser 1997; Kwon 1992).

> Female bodies have always been more vulnerable than men's to extremes of cultural meaning; witness the incapacitating effects of the nineteenth century corset. This is not just because they have bodies, of course, but because women's sphere is traditionally that of the body – looking after bodies other than their own while men attend to the mind (Adam 2001:40).

Therefore, belly-baring is a particularly hard-won victory for the many self-conscious women who choose to become belly dancers.

Chapter 3

# A DOCUMENTARY-DRIVEN METHODOLOGY

In The Belly Dancer Project, the methodology is more than merely a means to an end, but rather is under investigation in its own right. This is demonstrated in the second research question. *RQ2: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods – employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?* As social scientists become more cognizant of the research process itself, and of their experience with the research process, scientific inquiry ought to become a more consciously understood process, and the quality of the research increases. In this project there are several steps implemented to not only draw the research participants deeper into the research process, but also to force me, the researcher, to pause and reexamine the developing descriptions and interpretations. These descriptions and interpretations of the identity experience of the belly dancers, as well as the research experience itself are together the topic under investigation.

## An Overview of the Documentary-Driven Methodology

The Belly Dancer Project is a phenomenological research study structured around an emergent, multi-layered, documentary-driven methodology that is thoroughly documented and described throughout in order to generate holistic understandings of the belly dancer participants' identity constructions vis-à-vis the dance phenomenon as well as understandings of the research process itself[3]. It rests upon the production of a film that incorporates the interviews and performance

[3] All appropriate Intuitional Review Board approval forms for this study, along with the consent forms for featured dancers and focus group participants are included together as Appendix A.

footage of four featured dancers. They were interviewed about their experiences as belly dancers, their everyday lives, and their evolving identities in relation to their belly dance practices. They were each filmed while performing songs of their choosing, in settings they helped to direct. Each dancer was then brought into the editing room to go-over her interview and performance footage and shape her portrayal in the final film.

At this point, I reviewed the footage repeatedly until themes emerged and worked with a production specialist to produce a 56-minute documentary which includes identity themes narrated by interview footage, full-length performances for each dancer, and descriptive/contextualizing voice-overs resulting from my phenomenologically-generated understandings of the data.

Once the documentary was finished, each of the featured belly dancers was asked to co-host a screening party (focus group), so that she could experience seeing herself on film surrounded by her closest dance peers, and discuss with them the themes described in the film. Lastly, shortly following her screening party, I conducted an exit interview with each dancer about her overall experience of the research process.

In this way, I have sought to develop, execute, and reflexively describe a phenomenological research design that creates understandings – at every step along the way – about individual experiences of the identity process vis-à-vis the belly dance phenomenon[4] (which is distilled into RQ1). At the same time, I have sought to allow for an evolution of research design – and document that research process at

[4] This goal exists in tandem with the goal of inspiring within each participating belly dancer and audience member, deeper understandings of their own identities vis-à-vis the belly dance phenomenon.

*every* step along the way – that is phenomenologically transparent in its efficacy at answering RQ1 (which is the goal of RQ2). The sections to follow describe all of these steps in more detail.

**Steps of the Documentary-Driven Methodology**

*Video in Data Collection*

The incorporation of film into this study has become an integral component of the methodology of the research project for a number of reasons. Primarily, I have chosen to capitalize on the well-documented ability of film media to generate both cognitive and emotional understandings for the viewers (Jenssen, 2005), and then take the study several steps further and investigate the experiential effects that creating a film has upon research participants and researcher. This process has resulted in a 56 minute documentary that is intended to interest and entertain belly dance participants, social scientists, and the general public; primarily, however, it is meant to be a reflective surface for belly dancers to view themselves. As individual dancers interact with this film about the dance phenomenon to which they belong, it has the potential to cause them to examine their own experiences of identity drawn on by their belly dance involvement (as is discussed in Chapter 8: Focus Groups as Shared Reflection).

One of the common concerns that arises when using film or photography in research involves the issue of representation. Anthropologist Marcus Banks states that, "While film, video and photography do stand in an indexical relationship to that which they represent they are still representations of reality, not a direct encoding of it" (Henley, 1998:42). That is, "Although such representations may be based on the chemical or magnetic (or digital) registration of the objective physical features of the

things represented, their realization is influenced by both subjective and cultural factors" (Henley 1998:42). Any documentary film requires its producers to make a series of decisions beginning with: what, when, where, and how long to film participants. Editorial decisions involve constructing a story from video clips, creating voice-overs or otherwise narrating the footage, and combine with earlier production decisions about where to shoot the interview and performance footage; how to position lights, microphones, and cameras to best complement the type of footage and other postproduction decisions round out a suite of reasons why film is far from a direct encoding of reality. Involving the dancer in the staging, directing, and editorial process both simplifies and makes more complex this issue, as the video subject is empowered to self-edit – at least to some extent.

"Our consciousness of our own being is not primarily an image, it is a feeling. But our consciousness of the being, the autonomous existence, of nearly everything else in the world involves vision" (MacDougall, 2006:1). Incorporating film into the research process, then including as part of the discovery process the participants' feedback on their own films (in the editorial interview), allows for a coming together of two primary ways of experiencing. If the dancers' selves are experienced largely as a feeling, and this process allows participants to experience themselves visually – and to help shape the final audio/visual product, then the conventional, visceral ways of understanding individual selves naturally come under question. Using film is therefore particularly apropos in this context because of the question under investigation – the individual, experienced identity – is to varying degrees shaped by the embodied, performative, spectacular subculture (Hebdige, 1979) phenomenon of belly dance.

*Interview Videos*

This study relies heavily on the primary filmed interviews to draw-out descriptions of the individual construction of a given embodied, social reality[5]. To address this, the interviews in this study take the form of a lifeworld interview. Steiner Kvale describes a method for this lifeworld interview, which he defines as, "an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (1996:5-6). The term lifeworld itself has roots in Husserlian theory to mean the pre-cognitive experience of living in the world, and was further developed by Jurgen Habermas (1987[1981]), who developed the concept in ways more applicable to linguistically-based cultural understandings.

In these phenomenological/experiential lifeworld interviews, the course of dialogue is set largely by the participant (a.k.a. co-researcher), with a few predetermined questions or topics concerning the phenomena in question. "Why" questions are avoided, and other techniques are used in order to keep the interview dialogue describing the experience, rather than analyzing it (Pollio et al., 1997). The list of interview topics for The Belly Dancer Project (see Appendix B) poses a wide range of topics, aimed at learning about how belly dance is experienced by the dancer (e.g. "How do you feel when you are dancing?"), how she experiences her selves in relation to the dance and the rest of her life (e.g. "Do you think there's a big break between the belly dance world and your everyday worlds?"), and in what ways her belly dance practice is influenced by her spirituality and world view (e.g. "Describe

[5] There are several interviews included in the documentary-driven methodology – the primary (filmed) interview, a second (editorial) interview, and a third (exit) interview.

your spirituality," with a follow-up of, "Is belly dance a spiritual experience for you?"). A final topic, "What is it like for you to be interviewed about these things?" asked at the end of the interview, is included in an attempt to get at the participant's experience of the video interview method.

The interview with each of the four dancers to be featured in the documentary was conducted in the participant's home, or in my home. Lights and a single camera were set-up beforehand, and final production preparations were made by the videographer while the dancer and I talked about the study and went over the IRB consent forms. In all but one case, the cameraman remained in the room for the duration. The interviews took between 40 and 75 minutes, as topics were expanded, contracted, or deleted based on the participants' proclivities. After each interview was completed and I conducted an editorial interview with that dancer to review her interview and performance footage, I reviewed the combined raw footage several times for emergent themes for all of the dancers (and found such themes as: a welcome sense of obligation to the belly dance community; family/children being central to one's sense of selves and belly dance practice; and personal spirituality being tightly integrated with belly dance). I then organized the raw interview and performance footage onto a DVD to view with the dancer in her editorial interview.

It is important to remember that the filmed interview should not be mistaken for a direct window into the life world of the participant. When each interviewee responded to interview questions, her responses were representations (voiced as descriptions) of her lived experiences – which were remembered and linguistically filtered ad hoc during the interview. The video camera then created a representation of the interview (which itself, was a representation of lived experience). Later I, the

researcher, incorporating the feedback of the dancer from the editorial interview, made editorial decisions to depict the themes that emerged from all four of the dancers' interview footage using NVivo qualitative analysis software. I then worked with Tyler McGhee (owner of Piqtu Multimedia, and my husband at the time), to edit the interview footage together into thematic sections, each introduced with a voice-over, and illustrated with the belly dancers' performance footage and additional belly dance visuals. When the finished video was finally screened by the featured dancers and their focus groups, this projection yet again recontextualized the belly dancers' lived experiences to an audience. Therefore, it is important to incorporate these levels of representation into my own understandings of the phenomena developed through the documentary-driven methodology, and reflect upon their complexities while interpreting these understandings.

*Performance Videos*

Emmison and Smith state that because we exist within "a massively visual society," researchers must respond methodologically by visually enhancing our research, and by theoretically becoming more reflexive about the repercussions of this visual society. (2000). The performance video is employed in this study to draw the portrayal of the dancers' experiences of self out of the *verbal* sphere (where the interview is situated), and into the more *visual* and *kinesthetic* sphere. This is in order to get at the corporeal aspects of the belly dance phenomenon and to investigate the presence of embodied identity within the intersecting cluster of identities experienced by the dancer.

After the interviews were completed, the featured dancers were each filmed in a belly dance performance of roughly fifteen minutes – repeated several times for

a total of 40-60 total minutes (in three cases, three-to-five songs were repeated several times to achieve the best take). The performances were group and/or solo, depending on the style of dance performed by the dancer. The two Tribal style dancers in the documentary danced, at least for the most part, with their troupes (one of which is depicted only in a solo dance due to a subsequent troupe dissolution). Of the two Cabaret dancers, one performed solo, and the other performed solo accompanied by three live percussion musicians. In the film, the dancers are seen describing some of the distinctions that show up at this point, with particularly sharp distinctions being made between Tribal and Cabaret styles, and the resulting communal vs. individualistic experiences of the dance[6]. After the first pilot performance footage (of Shoshana) was shot in a restaurant setting, the dancers were taped against a naturalistic or black background with professional-quality lighting, using several takes to achieve multiple camera angles. This was done in order to highlight the dancers themselves, and the essence of their dance form, without visual distractions and low production quality to detract from the dance or from the dancers' authority as performers.

This choice to take the dancers out of an ethnographic context and ask them to perform solely for the camera better captures the dance form with reduced distractions, but this also comes with problematic issues surrounding the way the performances were experienced by the dancers[7]. Whenever a belly dancer performs, to some extent she is performing (through her self-created/assembled costuming

[6] Please refer to Chapter 4: Belly Dance Past(s) and Present; and Chapter 6: Performance as Identity Enactment, for a discussion of the characteristics of the various dance forms represented.
[7] One dancer even initially insisted on inviting her own audience to dance for, in order to elicit a more naturalistic performance. She later was unable to coordinate an audience, so there was no audience.

and carefully rehearsed dance movements) what she feels it is to be a belly dancer. And at the same time, she gives this performance for an audience, all the while internalizing and performing to her ideas about the audience's perception of her performance. However, when the only audience is a video camera, the belly dancer must also imagine the audiences to which she is performing, and perform to her ideas about how that audience will receive her performance. This filmed performance is then further decontextualized when it is edited to serve as interwoven companion to the interview footage. The Belly Dancer Project is structured so to best untangle these reflexive experiences of identity – by creating a structure in which each featured dancer (hopefully) felt safe enough to discuss them with me. Then the edited interview, performance, and any extra footage[8] was all combined with other featured dancers' videos, and shown as the complete documentary to belly dancer focus groups for its intended audience (belly dancers) to view, react to, and discuss. These reactions were captured when the dancer viewed her own performance video in the editing interview, and later in its complete form when she viewed it while surrounded by her belly dance peers. At this point, theoretically, she could more deeply incorporate her own reactions into her ever-changing experience of identity and with that, being a belly dancer. In this process, it is easy to see how the ways in which the dance performance is experienced, quickly grows in complexity.

*Editorial Interviews*

According to Henley (1998), if participants are included in the screening/editing process, closer relationships are built with them, new insights are

[8] This included, for example, footage of Terri teaching a belly dance class.

generated, and connections are made – all of which augmented my own understandings as well as added to the dancers' level of investment and trust. "By objectifying the traditions in which they may have unthinkingly participated before, the viewing of film rushes (footage) can even lead protagonists to make connections that are new even to them" (1998:54).

After each dancer's interview and performance were finished, I watched the footage with her, and we discussed her responses to the interview topics, her performance footage, and whatever else the filming/viewing experience may have brought up with her. We often stopped the video footage, discussed it, reviewed it several times, and talked about how the dancer would like (or more often, *not* like) to see herself portrayed – because in the performance as there were several takes to choose from and interview quotes in which they misspoke. By catering to some extent to the dancers' desires about how they were to be portrayed, I was able to reposition the documentary lens through which the dancers would communicate their identities to the world.

There was no firmly-set interview schedule for these editorial interviews, as we covered themes specific to each dancer's interview and performance idiosyncrasies, and I accommodated the dancers' scheduling and logistical needs. There was also no standardized situation or setting for the editorial interviews. This meant that in Nerissa's case, we met at her home and reviewed the footage in person. I met Mahin at her home as well, but we were joined in part by her primary musician who was interested in choosing the best musical take. Terri lived 150 miles away, so I sent her a DVD of the footage, and we watched it simultaneously while pausing to discuss it on the phone. I had previously been working with Shoshana in a pilot

capacity to develop the final documentary-driven methodology, so even though I didn't include her in an editorial interview, she had already seen and given feedback on a short, ten-minute documentary that featured her exclusively. Each of the dancers indicated one or two clips that she did not want to appear in any film or written portrayal of them, and I honored these requests[9].

*Making the Documentary*

After discussing the primary themes that emerged from the dancers' narratives, and narrowing down the footage available to use in the documentary, I returned to the editing room and immersed myself in the footage in order to develop these salient themes for each participant as well as for the group of four dancers when taken together. In order to do this, I utilized the QSR NVivo qualitative analysis software to organize all of the ethnographic materials generated to that point[10] in their original form alongside the transcribed text. This was done to better substantiate and illustrate the themes that emerged among the women as reporters of their experiences within the larger American belly dance phenomenon. What emerged was a series of themes[11] that were narrowed down and coalesced into sections of the documentary, resulting in a 56-minute film. In each of these thematic sections, I sought to incorporate two-to-three dancers' quote/clips to best illustrate the convergence and/or diversity of the dancers' experiences concerning the theme.

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[9] These passages were for the most part statements they made about other dancers or the dance community. They asked to retract these comments so as to not alienate themselves or hurt others' feelings.

[10] This includes the filmed interviews, audio editorial interviews, performance footage, any additional filmed footage of the dancers, my own field notes, and research journal.

[11] Belly Dance Style, Learning to Perform, The Embodied Experience, Costuming, The Dance Community, Transferable Skills, Identity Meld/Separate, The Evolving Belly Dancer, Belly Dance Ambassadors, Choreography, Worldview, Who is Important, Authenticity, Belly Dance Style, Learning to Perform, The Negative Side of Belly Dance, Physical Effects, Self Confidence, and The Future.

What began as an exercise in summarizing each of these sections for my own edification became voice-over narration to introduce the quotes chosen to exemplify each theme. The visual counterparts to these voice-overs were developed from supplemental belly dance materials[12], and performance footage. For the most part, whenever the dancers' responses to questions were included in these thematic sections, they were shown in talking head format, so as to cement the connections between viewpoint and the dancer espousing that viewpoint. Once the structure of the documentary was constructed thusly, performance clips were interspersed, and a single full-length performance from each dancer was inserted as punctuation throughout the documentary. The soundtrack for the documentary is solely drawn from music the dancers used in their performances.

Constructing the documentary in this way consciously places the documentary production *process* at the center of the research project. The completed film marks the fulcrum point at which the dancers' expressions of identity and impression management that I captured in the first steps to make the documentary, are cemented and reflected back to them in a recontextualized, polished format. From this point, I took the film back to the dancers, to capture their first reactions in the context of focus groups that they, themselves selected.

*Focus Groups*

The type of focus group to be employed in The Belly Dancer Project is what Edward Fern (2001) would describe as an exploratory focus group, due to the researcher's intention to use it for collecting unique thoughts about a general topic

[12] This includes historical photos and art, still pictures of other dancers, illustrations from belly dance books and costume patterns, etc.

(an effects application), and in developing hypotheses and theories about that general topic (a theory application). Puchta and Potter (2004) describe the nebulous characteristic of focus groups, in reference to what type of data they produce. The results are often singular quotations drawn from a cacophony of voices, and the focus of the group is often hazy. However, they state that this is not necessarily a problem, as the vagueness results from a conglomerate of pieces. This reflects a lack of one-to-one (i.e., interview style) information gathering, as focus groups allow for a looseness of idea-flowing that naturally occurs in group interaction. In this project, the focus group "looseness" serves as a nice counterpoint to the more focused, in-depth case studies generated by the documentary video process. It also helps to couch each dancer's viewpoints within her own, self-generated, snowball sample of peers.

Focus groups in this study are intended to help validate themes that emerged previously, as well as to create new ones. They are also intended to expand, nuance, and elaborate on these themes of identity that might have been just touched-upon in the first and editorial interviews. This was done by using a brief list of topics corresponding to the themes covered by the featured dancers, and merely gently guiding the discussion of the video enough to minimize significant tangents, etc. It is difficult to confine a woman's identity experiences to a shared film and I am cognizant of the secondary themes that had to be left out of the finished film in the essence of time allotment. By screening the combined video with belly dancers from the featured dancers' communities within the context of a focus group, I was able to generate the much deeper and more diverse data about belly dance-related identity experiences, which is discussed in chapters six, seven, and eight.

*Exit Interviews*

The exit interviews were designed as a final debriefing, a shared reflection about the research process, and a bookend to close the active part of each dancer's involvement with The Belly Dancer Project. I conducted these within two days of each dancer's focus group and entered into each interview without preconceived topics or concrete agenda – only a voice recorder. The exit interview, in this way, was never over-methodologized but rather intended to allow for one more meeting with each featured dancer, so that I could add context to her experience in the project by sharing my own personal, professional, and project-related details, and allow her to likewise open-up to me if she liked – much of this being off the record. These exit interviews (as well as at least one more phone conversation with each dancer in the two years since we conducted the focus groups) have helped to deepen my relationships with each dancer, and to engender a much greater level of trust in the research process and my role as their storyteller. I in turn also felt much more at-ease and natural about the depth of sharing I asked them to give – after the film was produced, all of the data collected, and we were at a point in the research process when personal reciprocity could be approached.

In this final dissertation report, there is less written about the findings generated from this step than there are from the filmed interviews, performances, or focus groups. However, I feel that the exit interviews and subsequent conversations are one of the most ethically important steps in the entire Belly Dancer Project. In the reflections and conclusions of Chapter 9, I discuss the importance of what Sarah A. de la Garza (writing as Gonzalez 2003) terms the, "ethics for post-colonial ethnography." These four ethics are, (a) accountability, which challenges us to tell the

story of how we are telling their stories, (b) context, that involves conducting our research and describing social communities/phenomena situationally, (c) truthfulness, that calls for a multisensory approach to seek-out the truths that are not readily apparent, and, (d) community. It is this fourth ethic of community that I feel is most served by the exit interview and subsequent follow-ups with the dancers. Garza talks about how when we gather stories ethnographically, we cannot separate ourselves from those who have expressed or received those stories, and we must respond to all of these new relationships with compassion.

> Compassion is the willingness to open one's self to see, hear, feel, taste and smell everything about another's experience – at the same time as we share our own experience without intentional or strategic, fearful distortion so that it might also be experienced by those open to community with us (Gonzalez 2003:85).

I believe that research that empowers – as The Belly Dancer Project certainly is designed to do – must be approached with the communal values of reciprocity and compassion. Community has proven to be a particularly relevant value upon which to build this particular project, as one of the main understandings generated through the research (and discussed in subsequent chapters) involves how much self-assurance each dancer draws from the belly dance community. I believe that it was my previous years participating in, and participant-observing the belly dance phenomenon that shaped my approach in this way – long before my organizing and describing of the data substantiated the theme of community as a central finding of the project.

*Description and Investigation of Data*

> Phenomenology is interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subjects' perspectives on their world; attempts to describe in detail the content

> and structure of the subjects' consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings (Kvale, 1996:53).

The above-described methods are intended to produce data about the participants' identities which can be further described in the fashion Kvale speaks of. Merleau-Ponty stated that what is most important is to describe what is given, as precisely and completely as is possible – with explanation and analysis being of far less importance (1962). This pure description step is key to the phenomenological method and makes possible a shift in the method from the description of separate phenomena to searching for their common meaning. So, as theory holds, if we carefully attend to the different individual manifestations of the phenomenon, we are able to arrive at a way of being for any such thing. Inversely, the individual identity experiences of the belly dancers become clearer as understandings of the shared phenomenon come into focus.

The strength of this process becomes apparent as I continue to examine the descriptive data generated by the previous methodological steps. By doing so, it is possible to develop rich descriptions of not only the identity experiences of the belly dancers, but also of the methodological experiences created by the research process itself. To arrive at any semblance of phenomenological understandings, this examination process requires that the researcher first engage in a step of pure description before any explication is embarked upon. In this case, much of the purely-descriptive step does not appear in the finished dissertation writing, but in separate research journals and production notes for the documentary film. It is only after the data have been thoroughly described that interpretations are proposed, and those interpretations are continually tested against the descriptions. In this process of

phenomenological understanding, the separate parts (the dancers' individual descriptions and performances of the phenomenon) are understood by proposing a global meaning, then seeking to understand that global meaning in reference to the meanings of the separate parts, and continuing to modify global meanings and the meanings of the individual parts in reference to each other (Seebohm, 2004). When describing and interpreting this documentary-driven, multi-phasal data, it is important to remember an important point made by Steven Kvale (1996), that the participants and I are co-creators of the data, and it is my job to describe and interpret that which I helped to produce.

According to Eliza Barkley Brown (1997), research ought to be compared to improvisational (nonlinear) jazz music instead of (linear) classical music. This is a way of thinking that, like many other feminist methodologies, brings us closer to incorporating a multiplicity of voices and influences that overlay and complement each other, rather than creating cacophony and dissonance from outlier data, as tends to result from methodological rigidity.

> Those who would alter the score or insist on being able to keep their own beat simultaneously with the orchestrated one are not merely presenting a problem of the difficulty of constructing a framework that will allow for understanding the experiences of a variety of women but as importantly the problem of confronting the political implications of such a framework, not only for the women under study but also for the historians (or social scientists) writing those studies. (Brown 1997:274).

The goal of this The Belly Dancer Project is obviously not to create straightforward categorical answers about how belly dancers construct their identities. The goal is rather to peek into the multiplicity of voices and the identities expressed by those voices – both as singular notes as heard in the initial interview,

editorial interview, and exit interview, as well as in layered harmonies as were heard in the focus groups. The desire to understand this multiplicity is reflected in all of the description/explication chapters of this dissertation (Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8). This is in order to answer the first research question*: RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?* To answer this question, I describe and interpret the data from all sources: interview (video/transcript), performance/miscellaneous other footage (video), editing interview (audio), focus group data (audio), focus group members' surveys (self-administered), exit interview (audio), the finished documentary (video/text voice-over), as well as my own research journals and previous papers on the subject (text/photography). The these data were cataloged using NVivo, reviewed and coded until themes emerged, and those themes are discussed in Chapters 5-8 of this dissertation – roughly organized by the methodological step that facilitated each new understanding.

This same method is also used to describe and analyze the research process itself. This is seen in the second research question in this study, which asks, *RQ2: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods – employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?* In The Belly Dancer Project, data were gathered from all steps along the research process, and used to create descriptions of this process. This research question spurred such straightforward supplemental questions as: "What worked?" "What didn't achieve the goals it was meant to meet?" and "What effects did the interviews/performances/focus groups (in the context of the documentary

production meta-method) leave on the featured dancers and on the researcher?" These and other questions came up along the way, and have been described using the phenomenological, description and explication method. Therefore, this is where we apply Kvale's focus, "Phenomenology is interested in elucidating both that which appears *and the manner in which it appears*" (my italics, Kvale, 1996:53), which was cited at the beginning of this section. The phrase, "and the manner in which it appears," refers to the ways in which the data (i.e. "that which appears") were collected. This forces a transparency of data collection which is (thankfully) becoming popular among researchers.

According to Valerie Janesick, "staying close to the data is the most powerful means of telling the story, just as in dance the story is told through the body itself" (1998:47). Therefore, in parallel phenomenological fashion, I first describe, as faithfully as possible, the ways the dancers have shared with me that they experience the belly dance phenomenon and how they have come to know themselves (i.e. create identities) through that experience. Then, by simultaneously turning the research lens inward onto myself as researcher, I construct a second-layer account of the project *itself*, by using data *from* the project itself, including my own experiences of constructing The Belly Dancer Project, by describing and explaining the many products of the study.

Chapter 4

# BELLY DANCE PAST(S) AND PRESENT

Before we begin to look for understandings about individual identity modification through belly dance, it is necessary to situate the phenomenon culturally and historically. While there is a fair-sized selection of literature on belly dance history available (see, for example, Al-Rawi 2003, Hobin 2003, Buonaventura 1998), the accounts vary widely and offer little in the way of a reliable, coherent progression. Many of the books and articles available were written by dancers, and though a small number of these present a rigorously-constructed narrative, the majority of the literature appears to be driven by individual authors who aim to substantiate a particular style of dance (Djoumahna 2003), offer advice for other dancers (Richards 2000), or otherwise create a name for themselves.

There are a few widely-accepted facts. Most writers agree that belly dance first appeared to a wide American audience at the 1893 Chicago World Fair, when one or several dancers appeared under the name "Little Egypt" to wide, shocked, and/or outraged acclaim. These "dancing girls" appeared along a strip called the Midway Plaisance. They danced what was then, and sometimes even now is referred to as *danse du ventre* which was appropriated from the French colonialists as oriental dance (Carlton 1994). From this first introduction, *danse du ventre* (belly dance*), raqs sharki* (oriental dance), *raqs baladi* (folk dance), or what will be consistently referred to as belly dance in this dissertation, went through a number of iterations. Burlesque shows in the U.S. began featuring belly dancers, often calling themselves Little Egypt. Certainly French and British colonial orientalist photography from the nineteenth century helped to influence a fascination in the oriental femme fatale in

Hollywood films during the first half of the 20th century (Buonaventura 1998). Images of belly dancers sold everything from silent movies in the 1910s to cigarettes in the 1950s. In this way, the image of the belly dancer transformed from its Berber, Egyptian, or Gypsy roots into a glitzed-up, high-heel wearing representation of the imagined orient. It wasn't long before this Holywood-ized image was reabsorbed by dancers and audiences in the Middle East, and to this day, public belly dance performances (often disparaged and heavily regulated) are performed with a shiny, sequined Americanized flair.

Belly dance remained largely locked in the entertainment sphere until the 1970s, when some feminists in the U.S. began to reappropriate belly dance to their own aims by touting belly dance as an ancient goddess dance or connecting to the dance in an essentialist feminist form in other ways (this is discussed below). One of the two major belly dance forms featured in The Belly Dancer Project – Tribal style – owes its roots to the liberal social climate of 1960s/1970s Northern California when Jamila Salimpour, Masha Archer, and others drew from many regional folkloric styles to develop and standardize an aesthetic quite contrary to the Holywood-ized Cabaret style. Today, belly dance in the U.S. is a wide-spread and extremely varied phenomenon.

Most publications and dancers agree that a belly dancer's body needs to be curvy, and that if one is too skinny, it is more difficult to see the small, nuanced movements of her torso. However, this is one place where Western aesthetics drive women's ideals for their own bodies, and the public perception of belly dancers. Many of the women who actually belly dance will disparagingly use the term, "belly bunny" to describe very thin young women/teenagers who proudly wear skimpy,

expensive costumes, but have very little dance technique. This mainstream popularization of belly dance is happening for a number of reasons. Belly dance costumes and movements are frequently spliced into VH1 videos, the Bellydance Superstars tour[13] and video franchise has promoted belly dance to the masses, but it has done so by only featuring women who approximate the ideal mainstream U.S. body type. "What used to be a 'real woman's' retreat from magazine model body-image standards is now being invaded through (Bellydance Superstars') huge popularity and status. This is true for both Cabaret and Tribal. Fit and curvy (not skinny!) was an ideal for Cabaret at one time. Tribal has historically been quite welcoming of all body-types, bit now Rachel Brice[14] is their poster girl…hmmm" (phone correspondence with a featured dancer in this project).

**Invented Traditions and Spiritual Belly Dance**

It can be argued that attempting to construct a historically accurate account of the thousands of years of Middle Eastern dance tradition and its later global iterations is of negligible importance for the purposes of analyzing individual identity among modern belly dance phenomenon. What *is* of interest instead involves Hobsbawm's concept of the invented tradition (1983), which,

> is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms or behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historic past (1983:1).

[13] Belly Dance Superstars is large budget, large-scale professional touring show and franchise. Amateur belly dancers will often eagerly attend a show if given the chance as it features some of the most famous belly dancers in the world. However they will also often critique it for a variety of reasons connected to its impact on belly dance culture and the public perception of belly dance culture that it promotes in mainstream society.

[14] Rachel Brice is at the time of this writing, the most famous individual in Tribal style dance. She is known for incorporating gothic elements into her dance, for her impressive muscle control/isolations, and most of all for her very lean and sensuous body.

American belly dancers in the twenty-first century selectively gather and interpret historical and ahistorical images of Middle Eastern, North African, Romany, Central Asian, Mediterranean, Indian, and other dancers to help them substantiate the identities they are creating through the dance. Because the messages conveyed through the myriad popular sources vary widely[15], the possibilities for community and individual manipulation, interpretation, and internalization of these historical themes are numerous. Broadly speaking, though, there appear to be two primary themes running through the belly dance popular literature: belly dancer as harem sex symbol, and belly dancer as ancient earth woman. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The first of these loosely labeled themes, belly dancer as sex symbol, is substantiated both by the Middle Eastern classification of belly dancer as disreputable influence (Bounaventura 1998; Abdelmohsien 2000) and by the Westernized version of the oriental spectacle (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003). As I previously mentioned, belly dancers first appeared in the U.S. in the 1890s as exotic side show acts in fairs and cabarets, and quickly became popular scenery in silent films through the early twentieth century (Bounaventura 1998; Salem 1995). This controversial popularity earned belly dance this name – or its even more derogatory identifier "hoochy-koochy dance" – and its sexually decadent reputation. Recent scholars highlight the exoticism of belly dance of the early twentieth century as the poster child for Western society's derogatory views about the orientalized Middle East (see Salem 1995, Abdelmohsien 2000). According to Savigliano,

[15] Browse titles like, *Grandmother's Secrets: The Ancient Rituals and Healing Power of Belly Dancing* (Al-Rawi 2003), and *The Belly Dance Book: Rediscovering the Oldest Dance* (Richards 2000) for evidence.

> Exoticism is a way of establishing order in an unknown world through fantasy; a daydream guided by pleasurable self-reassurance and expansionism. It is the seemingly harmless side of exploitation, cloaked as it is in playfulness and delirium. Exoticism is a practice of representation through which identities are frivolously allocated. It is also a will to power over the unknown, an act of indiscriminately combining fragments, crumbs of knowledge and fantasy in disrespectful, sweeping gestures of harmless banality (Shay and Sellers Young 2003:19).

Exoticism, a form of orientalism (Said 1994[1979]), comes heavily into play with Western belly dancers – often self-consciously so. In her deconstruction of 1990s belly dance in the U.S., Donnalee Dox states that "Western belly dancing simplifies the complex signification of the veil and the body by casting it as an a-historical symbol for the imagined eroticism of the East" (1997:152). In a veil dance, a woman dances sensually with a three-yard piece of silk – draping herself in different ways, spinning with it, pulling it around her body to reveal just a belly or a shoulder at a time, and mimicking a Middle Eastern full-face covering to just reveal her eyes. This popular dance displays an orientalist vision of female sensuality/sexuality. Yet as Wendy Buonaventura (2003) states, it is in the Christian West that men fashion women after their own desires to both advertise and conceal the female form, and a culture is built around women being constantly on display as sex objects in this peek-a-boo display. This is a conundrum pondered by Roland Barthes, who marveled at a Parisian strip-tease, and how the slowly disrobing dancer portrayed sexuality until she loses her last bit of clothing, then her body was recoded, and she lost the mysterious sexuality, to become asexually-nude (1972).

Contemporary teachings and performances of/by belly dancers are no less muddled on this point. On the one hand, students are chastised for not having the decorum to cover-up when not on stage, they are instructed on how to create

tasteful patterns of sequins and tassels on their heavily-ornamented bras, and are schooled in the appropriate body- tipping locations (demurely, at the shoulder-strap and at the side of the belt, if body tipping is expected at the performance venue). However, they often praise particular movements, or costume pieces as being sexy, and consent to perform in objectified situations such as bellygrams, a kind of dancing telegram usually sent to men. A good example of this contradiction can be seen in the following field account from my 2003 pilot study.

> (One dancer and I are watching a video of her daughter and another teenager performing to live music at a festival)
>
> The band here was great. Those two girls had a lot of fun. See her soft belly? It's great to have a soft belly, you can see more of the jiggles. Ha! Whew – those girls were pure eye candy for the audience!
>
> (My daughter) is fifteen now. It's great to bring in the little ones. (Troupe Leader) sometimes has a troupe of mothers and daughters, it goes over great. Some people think it's inappropriate for little girls, but it's good for them. Keeps them focused. (My daughter's) very well supervised, and physically strong – look at her stomach, she's stronger than most of her friends" (Sadiyah, Ramsi Watkins, July 14, 2003).

Thus, it is evident that, according to belly dance literature and ethnographic data, belly dancers still grapple with the orientalized sexuality that cannot be completely separated from the dance.

The second theme, that of belly dancer as ancient earth woman, is most often the history modern belly dancers choose to promote in their writings, probably because of the powerful feminist undertones to these traditions. Feminist belly dancing's popularity in the 1970s coincided with the feminist movement. Belly dance was reclaimed as a women's dance as an expression of fertility, childbirth, and creation, and attempts were made to discover evidence of ancient matriarchal cultures (Crosby 2000, Salem 1995). It was promoted as a way of resisting patriarchal

demands for the lean, young, Western ideal female form, as well as resisting patriarchal histories.

> In practice, spiritual belly dance, like Yoga, Tai Chi, Qui gung, or karate, became a mind-body practice which, because of its non-western origins, offers a fresh approach to spirituality with an emphasis on the female body… Spiritual belly dance, as a specific adaptation of belly dance, draws heavily on imagined reconstructions of the origins of Middle Eastern dance in matriarchal societies, goddess-oriented cultures, and rituals that pre-date institutionalized religion. The most important component of these imaginative histories is the presumption that in a distant, elusive past women's bodies, social power, and spiritual wisdom were valued in ways they are not today (Dox 2005:304).

I would argue, based on interviews and focus group data that more than the few self-identified spiritual belly dancers draw from this discourse. Belly dance, thus conceptualized, fit nicely into the budding essentialist arguments of cultural feminism and spiritual feminism (Dox 2005). However, it is interesting to note that belly dance as it is practiced in the U.S. today rarely reflects, "a solidarity with women living under repressive (patriarchal) political systems such as the former Taliban government in Afghanistan" (Dox 2005:308). It is rather seen as a psychological practice and emotional release for women in Western cultures.

A belly dance demonstration (accompanied by a consciousness-raising lecture) even appeared at the 1974 National Organization for Women meeting. Amidst the free-love movement, in which women were increasingly perceived as willing sex objects, belly dance (minus a public performance aspect) was sold as a way for women to reclaim their own sexuality, with a focus on women feeling sensual for themselves (Salem 1995). Belly dance is touted as an, "essentially womanly dance, for which all women were biologically equipped, and as a ritual relating to fertility and childbirth" (1995:236). Books and pamphlets have been

written highlighting the dance's connections with natural childbirth, ecological and menstrual cycles, and Jungian yen-femininity and yang-femininity (Al-Rawi 2003, Hobin 2003).

It is not surprising that today many individual belly dancers and entire troupes integrate their performance of belly dance into a pre-existing or concurrently developing framework of goddess-worship or witchcraft. This framework that scholars often term spiritual feminism (Luff 1990; Walters 1985) is built on many of the same beliefs that are seen the more spiritual veins of belly dance. According to Carol Christ (Luff 1990), goddess worship has four primary self-affirmative and empowerment-oriented implications for women which mirror those of belly dance: first, the Goddess symbol legitimates the beauty of female power; second, it allows women to reject the traditional Western devaluing of their bodies, menstrual cycles, and sexuality; third, to reject traditional religions' association of women's will with humankind's downfall; and finally, to focus on women's relationships to other women rather than just their relationship to men. Sellers-Young (1992), in a discussion of use of goddess images in belly dance in the 1980s, discusses one particular work in which four dancers, in costume and choreography, depict the four faces of the goddess: virgin, lover, mother, and destroyer (1992). A spiritual belly dance emerged, influencing all forms of American belly dance that, though immensely popular, "can be criticized for a lack of concern for technique, cultural specificity, historical accuracy, and authenticity in service of personal experience" (Dox 2005:303). One participant in my 2003 pilot study echoes the ease in which belly dance and goddess worship ideologies can be integrated:

> (I'm talking to Sadiyah about one of her troupe's performance videos, and ask about two women laying on the floor, corpse like, and draped in veils)
>
> It symbolizes healing, it comes mainly from our veil therapy (veil therapy?) Yeah, for example, when (Troupe Leader) and her man split, we read poems and burned herbs, then she laid on the ground and we draped veils over her, one at a time. It's soothing to see the colors mix over your eyes. Then we pull them off one at a time, and the draping, the feel of the veils sliding over you is very healing very safe. It's a healing group (Sadiyah, Ramsi Watkins, July 14, 2003).

**Belly Dance Styles**

There are numerous styles of belly dance in the U.S. today that range from "authentic" styles attempting historic and/or cultural accuracy to completely a-historical American inventions, and many that incorporate aspects of both. Even so, most dancers further blend the borders and say that they dance a fusion of the identified styles. In Phoenix, as in much of the Western U.S., the current divide is between Cabaret (mainly Egyptian or American Cabaret, which together are considered to be the more traditional style of belly dance), and Tribal (which is mainly a group dance). The most recent developments are occurring when instructors who were originally schooled in Cabaret or Tribal take-on and modify aspects of both, and integrate other forms of dance such as folkloric, Persian, Indian, hip-hop, techno, Poi, goth, etc. into a variety of fusion styles.

Most dancers in the United States today have at least at some point adopted some form of American or Egyptian Cabaret style. In brief, Egyptian Cabaret style is considered among dancers to be the most "authentic" of the styles, as it more closely mirrors the (Holywood-ized version of) belly dance as it is danced today in the clubs of the Middle Eastern. It is usually danced in the stereotypical sequined-bra and two-panel skirt ensemble, using tight and fairly constrained isometric movements, and

can be seen in most restaurant venues across the United States. American Cabaret incorporates the same basic costume (perhaps, in some cases, with slightly more or less body coverage), but involves a wider range of props, and the movements are broader and more gregarious – it is also widely popular among restaurant dancers, as it closely mirrors what customers expect. Both of these forms can be danced solo or as a group and especially when the American Cabaret style is incorporated, provide wide leeway for creativity and innovation. One recent national survey found that 30 percent of reporting dancers primarily practice Egyptian Cabaret, and 21 percent practice American Cabaret; these are by far the two largest styles of belly dance (Brown 2007). The costume remains fairly a-historical and driven largely by the original Holywood-ized image. In this study, Mahin is an Egyptian Cabaret dancer, and Nerissa dances American Cabaret.

Tribal Style is vastly different. It began as American Tribal Style (ATS), which originated in the 1960s-1980s Northern California hippie culture, and gleans its name from the tribal tattoo movement (Djoumahna 2003).

> The costume derived from photos of North Africa, Central Asia, and India is a postmodern pastiche of materials, design elements and colors. It integrates images from North Africa in a male Berber style turban, Northern India and Central Asia in the full skirts of the kathak dancer, mirrored vests and layers of Afghani jewelry with facial tattoos from across the Middle East and body tattoos and piercing associated with the contemporary primitivism a la San Francisco. The body within this costume combines the uplifted torso, hands, and arms of a Flamenco dancer with the grounded hips, legs and feet of a Middle Eastern dancer. Thus, the form fuses the visual, aural, and kinesthetic aspects of various tribal and ethnic groups into an evocative on stage image of women (Sellers-Young 2005:286).

The costume's elements are therefore a uniquely American compilation. Tribal Style, in its truest form is danced in groups as a collective improvisation,

incorporating an elaborate language of hand signals, and therefore is known for the strong bonds it creates among the dancers. Now that Tribal has become more popular, especially in the western U.S., many more variations and fusions of costume are emerging. There are also elements of choreography that many Tribal groups integrate into their performances, as well as solo dance utilizing traditional Tribal and Tribal Fusion style movements. The same demographic survey cited above estimates that eight percent of belly dancers primarily practice American Tribal Style, and fourteen percent dance Tribal Fusion Style (Brown 2007). One of the featured dancers in this project, Shoshana, belongs to one such Tribal Fusion dance troupes. Another dancer in the project, Terri, leads a more traditional, non-choreographed Tribal Style troupe.

**Phoenix Area Belly Dance Community**

Most of the classes in the Phoenix area are open to anyone over the age of sixteen (for insurance purposes), and occasionally host participants ranging from their mid-teens into their 80s. However, I estimate that most of the women are between 20 and 60 years old. Some dancers became involved in belly dance in the 1970s, and have remained in the community, or recently returned to it. According to Janice Crosby's 1997 study that is cited by Dox, belly dance and goddess spirituality movements draw from the same demographics, with the women practitioners likely being "thirty to forty, white, well-educated, and able to support the costs of costumes, workshops, classes and retreats" (Dox 2005:332-333). A more recent national study[16] of belly dancer demographics (Brown 2007) describes the subculture having the following modal responses: 93 percent female, 63 percent European

[16] The study is actually international, but 83 percent of the 553 respondents are from the U.S.

descent, 34 percent having a bachelor's degree (with a combined 81 percent reporting "some college" through "doctoral"), and 66 percent being in long-term relationships. Though some of women identify family roots in the Middle East, most seem to be of Western European descent, and are drawn to the dance for reasons unrelated to ethnicity or culture

With the exception of a few belly dance classes taught in studios dedicated to and decorated for belly dance, and a select few performance venues with stages that are designed with belly dancers in mind, the majority of the activity surrounding the belly dance community takes place in spaces the dancers themselves must create. Most classes are taught in community centers, elementary school cafeterias, yoga studios, and health club aerobics rooms[17]; and more and more, teachers have created home studio spaces in renovated garages, guest houses, or spare rooms. Weekend workshops, class performances, and festivals are held in public parks, churches, dancers' backyards, and motel conference rooms. If the organizer has connections, she might arrange for a Middle Eastern music group, which will often set their instrument array on large rugs, or an assortment of pillows and perform in costume, thus adding an authenticating fixture. Depending on the prestige and anticipated attendance of an event, dancer/vendors might display their wares on wheeled clothing racks, spread upon folding tables, or lumped in cardboard boxes. Otherwise, there is rarely any scenery against which the dancers can situate themselves. Given the prevalence of these unimaginative surroundings, the burden of imagination

[17] Although many belly dance instructors and professional dancers view these gym-based classes as bad for the art form, because these classes attach the name of belly dance to fitness classes stressing an elevated heart rate at the expense of dance technique.

placed on the dancers seeking an exotic dance experience is substantial – this helps to explain the importance placed on costuming.

Again, most activity within the community occurs in and around the dance classes because almost all dancers regularly either take or teach classes[18]. Public classes (usually taught through city parks and recreation departments) have anywhere from ten to 50 students per class, and typically cost less than five dollars per one-hour class (generally offered in six-to-ten week sessions). Private classes (taught in studios, dancers' homes, or otherwise unsubsidized by public funds) are more expensive – averaging ten-to-fifteen dollars per class, and rarely have more than ten students per class. Each teacher is associated with one or perhaps two class structures (e.g., City of Gilbert, and Domba Studio), and dance community members generally refer to that venue or class structure by the instructor's name (e.g., "I take from Yasmina in Mesa"). Within a single public class structure, the average instructor might teach three to four classes varying in skill level and technique – for example, two beginning-level classes, an intermediate-advanced class, and a drum class. Because many teachers in the Phoenix area were once connected via troupe membership, teacher-student relationship, workshop co-hosting, or more informal channels surrounding restaurant or festival performance, they will often promote a selection of upcoming events to their students (though usually only those sponsored by their closest associate). The intermediate and advanced student population also appears to be quite mobile within the community, most having taken lessons from at

[18] Restaurant and other paid jobs are few, and open only to the advanced (and thin) dancers. Most other performance venues are constructed and promoted by instructors – hence the present focus on classes.

least two instructors in the Phoenix area in addition to a variety of workshops with different teachers.

In order to promote enthusiasm and class attendance, each class structure incorporates a primary performative aspect. For many of the public Parks and Recreation classes in the Phoenix area, this is seen in the last class performance at the end of each six-to-ten week session. In these last classes, in front of friends and family, students perform a group choreographed piece, or improvisational movements which were practiced throughout the session. These group dances are supplemented by solo or ensemble dances by class members or any other belly dancer who wishes to participate. Students and guests are also encouraged to participate in open dances at these last classes, in which live or recorded music is played, and dancers and guests are invited to improvise. Private instructors/studios typically plan one-to-two showcases or gatherings a year, and are often attached to workshop events.

These performances function as a fashion showcase – an excuse for all levels of dancers to dress-up in full costume. For most student dancers sufficiently intrigued by the exotic costuming to make or buy costume pieces, this is the only appropriate occasion to display them. (Because although many dancers often wear or bring new pieces and partial costumes to class, they do not often wear the full costume for practice, nor do they practice in stage make-up, heavy jewelry, or head pieces/turbans.) Given that so much everyday discussion revolves around the crafting and purchasing of costuming, and the heavy burden of the overall exotic atmosphere of the event left to body ornamentation, it is no surprise that the show and tell aspect of the last class generates much excitement among dancers.

Some class structures – more often in private studios than public classes – do not integrate a last class component, and rely instead on instructor-run student troupes as incentives for continuation or, in a few cases, offer no performance venues for students until they reach an advanced level.

Very occasionally instructors will offer a costuming class or workshop which provides a more visible example of the usually informal conversations and meetings over costume-crafting. These classes and the shared expertise they provide are highly valued because most dancers choose to sew or at least modify their own costuming rather than buy expensive pieces hand-produced by local dancer/vendors, or mail-ordered from Middle Eastern companies (primarily located in Egypt). Costume pieces can also be found at some studios, belly dance swap meet events, and regional/national festivals. These are some of the ways that the belly dance phenomenon operates as a self-sustaining, woman-centered economy of new and used, homemade and imported belly dance costuming, jewelry, and other paraphernalia. Women also make money hosting their own workshops, retreats, and festivals, set-up their own on-line (often e-Bay based) businesses, and develop an amazing hodge-podge of ways to make money independent of their husbands or other male figures. This emphasizes another aspect of the contra-patriarchal trends supported by American belly dance.

A small percentage of largely Cabaret dancers perform for engagements that pay. But the amount that they are paid per engagement has fallen significantly over the last decade, and the amount that they earn in tips at each engagement has also greatly decreased. This is combined with a flooding of the marketplace by less-qualified hopefuls:

> I've seen a big explosion of "professionals" on the scene. I use the term loosely because they usually have just gotten to intermediate level, are 20-something and cute, and bought a costume online. Student performances have given them an overblown sense of confidence in their skills and they go out and hit the market at cheap prices. Typically, they seem to have little interest in deeper continuing education and apparently think they "have arrived" since someone is now willing to pay them to dance. Many figure that this qualifies them to teach as well. I am willing to entertain the possibility that the poor economy is influencing many of them to take on side work – perhaps sooner than they are really qualified to do (Phoenix Area Professional Cabaret Dancer, Ramsi Watkins, January 8, 2010).

These combined forces are driving a number of true professional-level belly dancers (like Mahin in this project) to draw their dance income from their national reputation as instructors of an ever-developing repertoire of dance variations. These professional Cabaret belly dancers are looking more to artistic stage projects and troupe work as directions for development – which is a direction that Tribal style dance has already been moving since its inception, partly due its aesthetic and communal dance style that make it a poor fit with a restaurant atmosphere.

Chapter 5

# FILMMAKING AS PHENOMENOLOGICAL DISCOVERY

This chapter is written as a readers' guide through the film production process[19], complete with a discussion of relevant literature about documentary and ethnographic film. I begin by explaining my overall reasoning for utilizing the documentary film medium to begin with. To me, this choice is an easy one to justify given the sensational, performative, visual nature of the belly dance phenomenon, and given the ease with which many people in the information age of the early 2000s connect with participatory media.

I trace the last century of documentary filmmaking through the movements relevant to The Belly Dancer Project, and find surprising similarities among quite disparate demographics of filmmakers.

From this foundation, I move into more direct discussion of the particulars of my own production methodology. Within each chapter section: *Casting the Lead Roles and Entering Identity Negotiations; Featured Dancers as Narrators, Performers, Editors, and Audience; 'Evolving a Documentary (Film)-Driven Methodology; Building a Plot through Rich Description and Film Editing; and From Documentary Production to Documentary Process as Discovery;* I discuss my decision-making process, and the insights I gained. Writing these sections has allowed me to condense much of my phenomenological description (originally residing in my research journal, coding notes, etc.) of the research experience in answer to *RQ2: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven*

[19] This backbone outline for this chapter is derived from email correspondence with Johnny Saldana, March 30, 2010.

*methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?*

And then finally and most importantly, I extend an eager invitation to every reader to watch the film for her/himself. This is your way to become a part of The Belly Dancer Project – to experience for yourself the belly dance phenomenon and challenge your own identity the task of self-reflection as you witness these strong women explore and share their identities with you[20]. Enjoy!

**Why Make a Documentary?**

Media analysts such as Henry Jenkins discuss at length the complex cultural shifts that take place as societies adjust to the continually changing corporate and individual control over media production.

> Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers. The promises of this new media environment raise expectations of a freer flow of ideas and content. Inspired by these ideals, consumers are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture (Jenkins 2006:18).

Jenkins and others have explained the enormity of this issue by couching it in terms of democratizing the means of media production. This framing makes sense in an age inundated with the cultural, consumer, and political digital influences of *YouTube, Facebook*, reality TV, *Twitter*, podcasting, and *Wikipedia*. I was immediately drawn to the idea of producing a documentary about and with American belly dancers for this very reason. It of course makes sense to incorporate video into a qualitative study of women who belly dance (it being a visual, musical, embodied

[20] Appendix C provides access to The Belly Dancer Project film. However if you are unable to access it with this copy of the dissertation project and would like a copy of the film, please email me at: animaswoman@gmail.com.

phenomenon) – this reasoning needs little justification. I am just thankful that at the time I was developing the methodology for The Belly Dancer Project, I was presented with affordable access to the means of media production, so that I could realize this most-appropriate vehicle of data collection. But more importantly to me, was being able to extend this access to the means of media production to my four featured dancers. This is because I feel it is my duty as the researcher to use my privileged position to create an empowering, feminist research project that gives the authority to my participants to tell/demonstrate/dance/co-direct their own stories. Sharing the access to the means of media production in this way then also directly strengthens the phenomenological foundation of the entire project because it is only when an individual is given her own camera, editing booth, stage, or microphone, can she truly teach others to see her lifeworld from inside her phenomenological soap bubble.

Only in this case – in The Belly Dancer Project – I have given the dancers a microphone, videographer, two cameras, stage lighting, sound mixing, and motion graphics, in exchange for a bit of directional structure to prevent absolute cacophony of accounts. So in true revolutionary fashion, I have attempted to arm my featured dancers with the capital to capture their verbal and physical expressions of identity, the expert labor needed to turn that raw footage into a cohesive, meaningful, and artistic film; the media product (DVD copies) of their efforts; and a microphone to capture their honest feedback about the product (which was also faithfully disseminated through this written dissertation).

**The Tradition of Documentary and Ethnographic Film**

The inventors of moving picture recording devices in the 1870s and 1880s – Louis Lumière and Thomas Edison – were inspired by the promise of capturing (documenting) events taking place in their world. And before filmed fictional drama was even conceived, the camera lens was drawn toward documenting human activity – often depicting such sensational visual scenes as dancing sequences, female nudity, and colonialist imagery of indigenous peoples (Barnouw 1974).

Even early ethnographic films were filmed emphasized the "otherness" of the films' subjects; they were oftentimes ill-situated/documented to create rich context; they were often focused upon ritual performances like the *Sioux Ghost Dance* from 1894, and the *Moki Snake Dance* of 1902 that were quite obviously tailored for the benefit of the camera (i.e., Western gaze); and quite likely did not incorporate any input from the subjects about their own filmed portrayals. The colonialized "freak" was clearly on stage in most of these portrayals, as is clear from reading the text of a 1902 brochure that describes this film-sensationalized Snake Dance as, "a spectacle unique in its impressive savagery (but the) horror of the exhibition is dispelled by the dash and spirit with which the celebrants perform the dangerous and thrilling rite" (Griffiths 2002:176).

Take also for instance the promotional description of the entertainment/ethnographic 1907 release, *From Cairo to Khartoum*, reifying and orientalizing Arabic culture as a series of frightening oppositions presented in *Moving Picture World*.

> Wild, fantastic parades… a fierce charge of Arabs… afford wonderful glimpses of the manners and customs of these barbarous tribes… Arab market scenes at Cairo [that] are deliciously novel to Western eyes – men, women and children of all shades of black and brown chatter and gesticulate, squat, walk or stand as they buy or sell wares and produce… veiled and unveiled women, rough and unkempt men, burmoused [sic] and turbaned – all make up a sum of wonderful Oriental variety and animation that will live for years in the memory (Griffiths 2002:214).

This was a silent film, when nonfiction films were still promoted to theatrical audiences. By the 1920s when talkies became commercially available, self-declared anthropologists had largely begun to take-up research questions that were not particularly suited to visual data collection and display, and their work moved away from the theatre. By this time theatrical movie houses were no longer showing nonfiction films with the same frequency. However, technological, directorial, and artistic developments continued to be made in the field of documentary film on a variety of fronts. Filmmakers have experimented broadly with their roles as directors/producers; with the ways they portray their subjects; with the express and covert purposes of their films; and with the ways they use the camera, edit their footage, and include voice-over narrative. As a result they have widely manipulated the ways in which audiences experience the subject matter and the world around it upon viewing these films.

The first full-length documentary film masterpiece to be produced in 1922 by prospector and fur trader Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, was ethnographic in nature – almost anthropologically so (having been in production for more than a decade). This film placed the viewer in the role of 'explorer' of an exotic people in their (only somewhat staged) everyday lives.

> Early films offering ethnographic knowledge or spectacle can be read simultaneously on several registers: as aesthetic objects; as fleeting, scopophilic gazes upon objectified men, women, and children; as historical artifacts; as colonialist propaganda; as the raw material of anthropological research; and as justifications for social policy (Griffiths 2002:xxx).

Flaherty's film has been seen in a number of these lights – including illustrating apparent rapport between an off-camera filmmaker and his subjects. Therefore it remains a seminal work in the development of documentary film.

Also working in the 1920s, Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov (born Mikhail Kaufman) coined the term, *Kino-Pravda*, (this means film-truth and was later translated into the French, *cinema vérité*, which spawned the ironically stylistically contradictory American "direct cinema"), and took a much different approach to nonfiction documentary film. Vertov laid the groundwork for creatively showing the hand of the filmmaker within the production cycle in order to not hide (as was the desire of the day) but rather emphasize the fact that the camera is, "the mechanical I… The machine showing the world as it is, which only I am able to see" (Aufderheide 2007:38). In his 1929 masterpiece, *The Man with the Movie Camera,* Vertov created an almost poststructurally-reflexive experience for his audience (with quite obvious methodological inspiration for The Belly Dancer Project).

> We see the making of a film and at the same time the film that is being made… we get a through-the-camera view of a passerby; see him reacting to the camera; then we see the camera as seen by him, with his own reflection in the lens… In a superimposure we see a camera on its tripod, seemingly the size of an Eifel Tower, standing with the cameraman in the midst of a vast crowd of tiny people: a highly expressive image… At the end of the film, camera and tripod take a bow by themselves (Barnouw 1974:63).

Following this first generation of nonfiction films and a period of film styling heavily influenced by the journalistic wartime propaganda of World War II, America

saw the rise of direct cinema in the 1960s. Direct cinema arose as new 16mm filmmaking equipment became lighter, cheaper, and easier to produce. Advances in synchronized sound made it possible to record sound and video simultaneously, so filmmakers of this genre largely did away with voice-over narration. The point of direct cinema was to insert the camera, as unobtrusively as possible, into a social situation or event and allow the audience to observe it in fly on the wall fashion. This style became pervasive, and its progeny still dominate television and internet in the forms of reality television, behind-the scenes documentaries, and docudramas (Aufderheide 2007). And while, on the one hand, democratizing the means of media production meant for much broader access to film production, and the audio technology pushed filmmakers to allow film subjects to speak for themselves, this production style was not without repercussions.

Proponents of direct cinema made claims that direct cinema captured truth in a way that more artistically crafted and organized documentaries could not (Barnouw 1974). The potential dangers to the misrepresentation of peoples, facts, and events within direct cinema– posed by its invisible hand of production – are the same dangers inherent within self-proclaimed unbiased, positivistic research within all of the social sciences. This is because not only is it impossible to make the hundreds of production decisions without asserting one's identity and proclivities into the film; but by actively involving participants in a research project ensures that they will act differently than they would if not self-consciously being watched by a social scientist.

Practitioners of direct cinema's European cognate, *cinema vérité,* shared the goal of capturing live events as they unfold in a naturally occurring social setting. Yet

there is an important difference: these largely international counterparts worked to address the impact that the production crew and camera had upon the film subjects – making *cinema vérité* a much closer descendent of Vertov's *Kino-Pravda*. Prolific film ethnographer and anthropologist Jean Rouch completed more than 120 films largely from the 1940s through the 1970s, and epitomized the French *cinema vérité* style, in that he often sought to capture events as they unfolded without a great deal of narration. However, instead of seeking to deny the presence of the camera, he often involved the film subjects in the making of the documentary so as to co-produce the cinematic creations with them. His response to the assertion that the camera might change the behavior of film subjects was that,

> In *cinema vérité*, people's reactions are "infinitely more sincere" on camera than off because "they begin to play a role." Sincerity is thus equated with an acknowledgement of the filming process, so although "a camera's a camera, an object which you can't not notice," a documentary is inevitably built around its presence – and the concomitant presence of the crew (Bruzzi 2000:92).

The Belly Dancer Project's phenomenological methodology draws inspiration from Rouch's approach to ethnographic filmmaking under the anthropological umbrella. He claimed to make films in order to draw the discipline of anthropology away from being "the elder daughter of colonialism." He made films not only for himself and for general audiences, but because, "film is the only method I have to show another just how I see him" – an aspiration that, if completed, demands a feedback loop. Since the 1960s, Rouch has been inspiring social science ethnographers such as myself interested in shifting the power relationship between researcher and research subject. He is quoted as saying, "Thanks to feedback, the anthropologist is no longer an entomologist observing his

subject as if it were an insect but rather as if it were a stimulant for mutual understanding" (Aufderheide 2007:113).

But what about self-consciously ethnographic filmmaking, within the field of anthropology? Despite the (now) seemingly commonsensical advantages of using documentary visual representations of culture to both capture and communicate ethnographic understandings across cultures, the practice of ethnographic film within anthropology has always been met with ambivalence. Even in the 1960s – a good 60 years after Edison and Lumiere introduced documentary film into the repertoire, and while *cinema vérité* was capturing the interest of nonfiction film audiences worldwide – anthropological innovators such as Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson met with opposition when they sought to inspire their peers to incorporate film alongside their written accounts of foreign cultures (Griffiths 2002).

An overall lukewarm acceptance of film within the anthropological discipline has continued. Some anthropologists to this day question film as being capable of promoting appropriate research topics, as a valid form of data collection, as facilitating positive relationships with research participants, and as being capable of truthfully disseminating these findings to various audiences (fellow researchers, school classrooms, television audiences, policy makers, and occasionally the research participants themselves). Yet an undercurrent of visual anthropology has persisted, continuing to creatively tackle issues of power and representation. One crew of Mohawk Indian filmmakers trained by the National Film Board of Canada's Challenge for Change went on to document their social movement demanding duty-free passage throughout their reservation that straddled the US/Canadian border in the 1969 film, *You Are on Indian Land*. In the early 1970s, Sol Worth and John Adair

embarked upon a project to teach several Navajo people to use cameras and editing equipment in order to make a series of short films about their own lives. In 1979, Australians Jerry Leach and Gary Kildea worked together with a Trobriand Island political association to produce *Trobriand Cricket*. This film portrayed the islanders as "far from victims in need of salvage ethnography they, like Rouch's subjects, are creative cultural innovators" (Aufderheide 2007:114). So innovative practices involving ethnographic filmmaking certainly do exist. And in the decades since *Kino-Pravda* began to draw our gaze 360 degrees around the camera all manner of research participants have been empowered to influence their portrayals. With The Belly Dancer Project, I hope to challenge audience members by adding to Vertov's provocative legacy. But even more, I hope to draw inspiration from these great innovators in order to give back to belly dancers, a film that will broaden their understandings of identity.

**Producing the Documentary-Driven Methodology**

In this section I break-down the multi-method design culminating in The Belly Dancer Project documentary film into a series of steps that organically developed as I worked with the featured dancers to meet both my research needs as well as their needs for self-expression within a host of logistical constraints.

*Casting the Lead Roles and Entering Identity Negotiations*

As I discussed in Chapter 3: A Documentary Driven Methodology, much of the footage for The Belly Dancer Project (film), and subsequent reflection was gathered through a series of three interviews with the four featured dancers. I contacted three of the four featured dancers (as well as several others who didn't end-up participating) because either they were referred/suggested to me by other

dancers, or because they were renowned in the Arizona belly dance community[21]. After I contacted each potential featured dancer and made initial negotiations via phone and email, the first face-to-face encounter I had with three of the four featured dancers was when we met for the filmed interview session.

During this recruitment process, I sought to include individuals whose identities were likely to have been shaped in a spectrum of ways by the belly dance phenomenon. I certainly knew that the two rough stylistic camps – Cabaret and Tribal – that dominate the Phoenix belly dance community needed to be represented. I also sought to draw dancers from four distinct levels of expertise and involvement, and achieved this in casting a Cabaret hobbyist, a Tribal troupe member, a Tribal troupe leader, and a Cabaret professional. I also made an effort to include participants of a wider age range than I ended-up managing to do, and arrived at a mean age falling in the early 40s, which is somewhat higher than the 35.4 year-old mean age that a recently-produced, national study has found for American belly dancers at large (Brown 2007). Recruiting only women for the project is also justifiable as per my own understanding of the local dance community – an assumption that is supported by the 97 percent female demographic found in this same independent study. Yet, it should be noted that above all, my sampling goal was to integrate an array of experiences with the belly dance phenomenon, rather than to produce a mirror representation of any given belly dance population demographically. I believe that I certainly achieved this goal.

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[21] I began negotiations with roughly twice the number of women who finally agreed to participate (4). Some women were referred to me by well-connected dancers, while I contacted others merely through their websites. The exception to this is Shoshanna, with whom I had previously danced, and who participated in The Belly Dancer Project in a pilot role, through several iterations.

*Featured Dancers as Narrators, Performers, Editors, and Audience*

Once the audience has viewed The Belly Dancer Project film (see Appendix C), it quickly becomes apparent that the four featured dancers are incredibly strong and independent women. These are the very characteristics that I observed developing in women who belly dance across the board, and the reasons why I chose to study belly dance as a phenomenon with particular impact upon individual identity strengthening and modification. Therefore, it was of no surprise or disappointment when the dancers in The Belly Dancer Project immediately asserted their wishes, opinions, and idiosyncratic demands upon the film production – as soon as initial introductions had been made and project involvement negotiations began. I promoted this from the beginning (much to the exasperation of my videographer), because it has always been my expressed purpose to use The Belly Dancer Project as microphone and mirror, in order to empower the women who participate.

Establishing individually appropriate boundaries, tailoring my communication style, and adjusting the recording venue/logistics to suit each dancer's level of comfort with me, with talking about herself, and with dancing in front of the camera was a process that forced me to develop experiential-based understandings about each dancer. Therefore, as the documentary-production process progresses, so did my own, personal phenomenological understandings about each dancer, as this process of mutual discovery drew us into closer, more meaningful relationships with each other.

The area in which the dancers asserted their independence and authority surrounded their individual dance performances. Whereas they all expressed a level of anxiety over being interviewed on camera (some more than others), they all have

confidence in their dance abilities, and if there was going to be a film produced that featured them, they were all quite interested in helping to tailor the recording logistics to best highlight their dance abilities. Not unpredictably, the two most experienced/confident dancers, Mahin and Terri, were the most adamant about dictating these recording conditions: Mahin brought three musicians with her – as she dances almost exclusively to live music; and Terri initially protested my request that she and her troupe dance solely for the camera, stating that dancing for a camera disallows for the essential dancer/audience interaction that fuels dancers[22].

Similar assertions of identity emerged as we embarked on their editorial interviews. I spoke at length with Terri about which songs and which takes I should use, and what overall image should be portrayed in that troupe performance footage. She very much wanted me to get in a "giggle moment" from the take, but unfortunately I was unable to do so. Terri also expanded on her already quite articulate responses to the interview questions, and several times we paused the footage for a time so that she could explore exact meanings to the topics I had presented. Mahin, in looking back at her interview, seemed very much aware of her place as a central public figure in the belly dance community, and engaged in some censoring of her interview responses so as to ensure that I did not include any comments that might be misconstrued by various groups or individual dancers. She was interested in being very precise in her meanings about how she felt belly dance (through the music). She also was able to delicately manage the situation in which

[22] This came about after Shoshana's three attempted performance filmings (two at restaurants, one at her home) resulted in low production quality. We compromised that we would film the performance in a setting (her patio) primarily for the camera, but she could recruit an audience of troupe members – or whomever she wished – to sit alongside the camera. Eventually she abandoned this requirement for reasons I didn't inquire about.

Gaby Tawil, her main drummer, was interjecting his input about the musicality of the performance footage, and helped him understand the recording limitations that precluded a good audio recording of his music. Nerissa, in her editorial interview, reemphasized her main point that she enjoys the women's community aspect of belly dance, and continued to present openness and sincerity as she reviewed her footage. She also had definite opinions as to which performance pieces she preferred, but deferred to me in pulling interview quotes for the film – she was comfortable with everything she had said. Shoshana had been involved in a pilot capacity, and did not go through an editorial interview.

But one of the strongest assertions upon the film production that the dancers made, actually happened during their physical absence. It was when I was fairly sequestered with all of the footage, their editorial feedback, and my notes, that I became most conscious of the heavy responsibility I bore to do as I had promised, and take a backseat to their expressions of identity. This time was exciting, as the dancers' stories were so strong – many shared themes just jumping out and begging to be expressed. However, it was also quite stressful, as I sought to balance the process of uncovering understandings about the women of the belly dance phenomenon by peering through their phenomenological lifeworld soap bubbles without scientifically objectifying my participants – and producing a cohesive, aesthetically pleasing, and academically-valid documentary product. Often during this editing process, I would also come-up against production constraints, budgetary roadblocks, and artistic disagreements with my film editor/then-husband that would directly interfere with my idealized intentions of how to best portray the dancers. All of this obviously contributed to an emotionally-taxing production cycle. However, in

hindsight, it is my belief that the act of undergoing such a plate of conflicts and warring narratives is not only necessary for the conscientious and transparent social scientist, but also crucial in phenomenologically experiencing the qualitative research process.

*Evolving a Documentary (Film)-Driven Methodology*

The film went through several incarnations before reaching its eventual structure – the strongest elements of each contributing to the final shape of The Belly Dancer Project film. The most prominent of these evolving manifestations was a research design in which I had planned to film each of the three-to-five dancers in interview and performance footage (just as in the final version of the research project), but instead of producing a single, 56-minute documentary, I had planned on posting each of the belly dancers' stories as mini-documentaries (roughly ten minutes each) on a self-designed, built, and administered social networking site that I had intended and designed for national and international belly dancers to utilize (I envisioned a *Facebook* for belly dancers). I would then ideally be able to collect all of the data generated by the site – chat rooms, individual members' photos, blog postings, and most importantly, feedback and discussion about the individual featured dancers' mini-documentaries. To test this model, I filmed and produced Shoshana's vignette, and, along with my web-designer/ex-husband, spent many hours creating the website with a section devoted to displaying the vignette and soliciting discussion feedback about it (as well as registration pages, space for other dancers to comment on Shoshana's video, post their own pages with material, etc.). Unfortunately, recruitment to the site was slow and inefficient, and involvement by visitors was superficial in nature. I was therefore unable to fully utilize the

functionality of the site, to draw a solid number of visitors to the site, or pull from them any real critique or substantive feedback about the pilot dancer's (Shoshana's) mini-documentary to merit my continuing to try and collect data in this way. I also discovered in myself through this experiment an aversion to online social networking as an authentic and rich venue for identity expression and meaningful discussion about such visceral/embodied experiences as belly dance.

But this cyber-rendition of The Belly Dancer Project did lead me to develop the current full-length film documentary methodology that retains the audio-visual representation of each dancer's identity portrayal that I first explored through the web-based documentary methodology, while providing a more reliable (and face-to-face) feedback stream utilizing screening parties (focus groups) organized by each of the featured dancers. Moving into the larger project of the documentary film also encouraged more flexible feedback relationships with each featured dancer – with varying levels and types of involvement in the editorial interviews, focus groups, and exit interviews – so as to more easily accommodate their individual proclivities and desires for involvement.

As I began to rework the research model to incorporate a full-length documentary production, I realized the methodological strengths of this development. The most important of these came from engaging in the lengthy phenomenological process of immersive discovery and rich description of the data was the film-making/editing process itself. Generally speaking, when working with video footage to create a documentary film, a director/producer must, in almost grounded theory tradition, work primarily from the footage (dialogue and visual) to shape the story. In the case of The Belly Dancer Project film, I employed the

qualitative data analysis NVivo software to organize the footage by dancer and theme, so as to better systematically shape thematic sections around the most important, shared phenomenological experiences associated with belly dance. What emerged were seven thematic sections plus the introductory sections of the film (1. Introduction to The Belly Dancer Project; 2. Introduction to the Dancers; and 3. Differences in Style – Cabaret Style vs. Tribal Style), which were fairly straightforward due to my deep immersion in the data, and years-long involvement in the phenomenon.

The overall editing process is described in the following section, but germane to the present discussion of how the full-length documentary methodology strongly contributes to the phenomenological research design is the process of structuring the audience's experience of the film with voice-over. Each section of the film also includes a voice-over introduction by me – and this is a production component that actually emerged from the process of organizing (coding) the footage and describing my observations in my research journal. But what began as behind-the-scenes, first-level phenomenological description of the dancers' interviews became voice-over narration to guide the audience through the expressions of identity portrayed in the film.

*Building a Plot through Rich Description and Film Editing*

What eventually resulted from this documentary-driven methodology is a film that is largely structured thematically around the featured dancers' initial (filmed) interview content – and is supplemented/illustrated with their performance footage, information about the overarching belly dance phenomena, and various other collected belly dance materials. The production process was carried-out in the

following way. After all of the footage of the four featured dancers was shot (initial interviews and performances), instead of immediately sequestering myself to edit, I systematically sought-out the dancers' reactions to, and opinions about all of their respective footage during an unstructured 60-90 minute conversation that I have labeled the second/editorial interview (which I audio recorded). Once each dancer and I were both satisfied that I understood her opinions about her overall portrayal[23] and preferences/tips on editing her dance footage, I set about organizing the combined interview video footage together – using the QSR NVivo qualitative analysis software – into descriptive themes. What emerged from this process was the series of seven most prevalent topical sections (in addition the film's introduction and conclusion sections, and a section introducing the dancers). These sections are listed below, and the complete documentary transcript is included as Appendix D.

1. Introduction to The Belly Dancer Project
2. Introductions to the Dancers
3. Differences in Style – Cabaret Style vs. Tribal Style
4. Learning to Perform
5. An Embodied Experience
6. Costuming
7. The Importance of Community
8. Tearing Herself Apart
9. Coming Out Ahead
10. Future

[23] Interestingly, the most prevalent requests from the dancers in these editorial interviews were to revoke comments from their original interviews about other dancers or other segments of the belly dance community that, if included in the film and taken out of context, might cause hurt feelings.

Throughout this process, I continued to make editorial decisions that would elucidate the dancers' stories in the way prescribed by the first research question, *RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?* This said, the research question is intentionally posed and operationalized broadly in order to allow for the explorative nature of a phenomenological study such as this. The structure of the documentary's sections follows this same directive. So once I had imported all of the audio and video data into the NVivo software, I embarked upon coding the footage first by interview topic, then along more organic, grounded threads, as I set about teasing-out the dancers' primary areas of identity development and expression vis-à-vis belly dance.

To do so, I employed Seebohm's (2004) phenomenological directive to seek understandings of the separate parts by proposing a global meaning at the level of the overarching phenomenon, then to seek understanding of that global meaning through the meanings of the individual parts as they relate to one another – and on and on, dialectically, until holistic *understandings* emerge. Once ten themes coalesced (which unfortunately I had to cut to seven for production reasons), I then chose the most moving or illustrative interview quotes to narrate the themes. My goal in selecting (admittedly privileging) specific voices to narrate the thematic sections was to allow the breadth of content among the dancers' quotations to structure each section's feel and overarching messages (especially when two or more of the belly dancers either echoed or vehemently disagreed with one another on a common theme, as is most obviously seen in *Section 3: Differences in Style – Cabaret Style vs. Tribal Style*). During production, I worked closely with my videographer/editor/sound

engineer/graphic designer[24] to develop a look for the film, to record my explanatory voice-overs introducing the film sections, to create visuals to accompany the voice-overs, to mix the dancers' submitted music, and to carry-though all additional editorial changes.

*From Documentary Production to Documentary Process as Discovery*

It is difficult to overestimate the impact that going through this documentary-producing process has had on developing my own understandings of the ways women experience themselves via the belly dance phenomenon, and in fueling my desire to portray as accurately as possible each of their stories. And methodologically speaking, placing the documentary-production process at the center of the project as a fulcrum between data gathering and feedback generation (which is discussed in the Chapter 8: Focus Groups as Shared Reflection) – both of which are conducted with the featured dancers, led to a level of accountability to them that is not necessarily mandatory in many other social science research agendas.

It is important to remember that The Belly Dancer Project was drafted as a phenomenological study meant to not only better understand how belly dancers' practices influence their constructions of identity (RQ1), but more importantly to draw understandings about the research process by examining how the participants and I experienced the research process itself. This second level reflexivity (summarized in RQ2) is the driving force behind the decisions to go beyond the

[24] For these tasks, I relied on my then-husband, Tyler McGhee, of Piqtu Multimedia. While the resulting production quality for The Belly Dancer Project documentary is quite high, working on the film together became a strongly contentious activity as our marriage collapsed. During this time, distribution of the film was put off for more than a year because he would not make final edits and add the credits/bibliography. Then after the divorce, he withheld the near-completed documentary for some period of time, until he was legally compelled -- further delaying my writing the final dissertation, and compounding the emotions surrounding the project.

scope of producing a documentary in a more conventional, linear way, to instead employ this three-interview structure.

This documentary-driven methodology that organically developed in-situ, began with the first (filmed) interview to generate content for the film. Then the second (editorial) interview was put in place to a.) empower each of the featured dancers to further impact the telling of her story; to b.) give her a reasonable level of veto power over interview responses and performance takes that she did not want shared with the belly dance community; and c.) to generate important feedback data about her evolving experience with the researcher and research process within The Belly Dancer Project (at this point, feedback was largely focused on her experience in front of the camera in the interview and performance settings). The third (exit) interview, was then conducted within two days of each dancer's co-hosted screening party/focus group in order to discuss with her: her overall experiences in the research project; her experiences with me throughout the research process; and her experience watching the film for the first time, surrounded by her immediate belly dance community (which also brings further understanding to the focus group method). The following chapter is fully dedicated to this three interview process, and the thematic and methodological understandings that the interviews generated.

Chapter 6

# INTERVIEW AS OPEN MICROPHONE

(What is it like for you to be interviewed about these things?)

> Being interviewed, it's almost teaching in reverse, because you have to really be articulate about how you feel about things, so I think it's really been good for me… because it helps me identify where I'm at. And over the years I can see some changes of how I felt about things, but it's the interview process that has brought that about. Because otherwise, you're just living and thinking, and not really comparing unless you've read an old journal or something.
>
> You know, these are questions that I might not have asked myself. But you asking me them kind of helps me identify where I'm at about a certain topic. (That's good. That is what I hope to bring to you, because you are giving me so much.) You are definitely doing that. Thank you, because I haven't been asked in interviews about my childhood, or my spirituality, or my family, or any of that stuff, so that is a new component. Thank you (Terri Filmed Interview, 2009).

The dual purposes of The Belly Dancer Project are to RQ2) tell the story of how I used my research tools to empower, RQ1) four American belly dancers to tell and dance the stories of their own identity constructions. The medium I provided them with was the documentary video. They were able to impact the production of the documentary by discussing with me their production ideas and informing my narrative voiceover, by co-producing their dance performances, by having first veto power over their interview and performance footage, and most importantly by providing the film with its four main characters via the filmed interviews.

The first filmed interview provides the core of the data needed to address *RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?* These 40-75 minute video interviews drawing strongly from the tradition of phenomenological "life world interviews" were semi-structured around topics intended to help the dancers describe their experiences in

an open and flexible way. Any verbal prompts/encouragements that I added in-situ were meant to elicit more descriptive storytelling, and to allow for a natural reciprocity of dialogue to emerge between us.

So then several weeks after each dancer and I worked together in this filmed interview to capture her narration of her identity experiences (despite the admittedly distracting camera and lighting), we would conduct the editorial interview, watch this interview footage together, and discuss it. During these editorial sessions, the dancers all had points to clarify where they felt they had misspoken. They also all delved deeper into several topics, and each had at least something she preferred not be included in the film. So in essence, I attempted to keep each dancer in a descriptive mode during the primary interview (without asking them to process or analyze their descriptions while they were describing their experiences), so that she could view her descriptions during the editorial interview and reflect upon her original descriptions after they were documented by the camera.

Keeping the primary interviews as purely descriptive as possible in this way also allows me to present these first-person descriptions to viewers of The Belly Dancer Project documentary and allow them to participate in the film by interpreting/analyzing the narratives for themselves without feeling they are being spoon-fed pre-determined meanings. Included in these documentary audiences are of course most importantly the focus groups and the featured dancers themselves. Each focus group engaged in lively discussions about the descriptive narratives presented on film. They interpreted the featured dancers' life-world descriptions from their own unique perspectives and lived experiences with the belly dance phenomenon – exactly as I had hoped they would. And finally, while talking candidly in their exit

interviews, I was quite happy to hear how each dancer had grown from the process of voicing these lived experiences, watching herself say these things in unedited form, then seeing her own narratives cut and presented thematically side-by-side with other belly dancers, and by experiencing her peers react to her narratives thusly situated in the film. It was quite gratifying to conduct the exit interviews and have all four dancers open-up more to me than they had at any time previously. I took this to mean that working with me in this documentary-driven methodology I had developed for them was indeed a positive, empowering, and enlightening experience that engendered their trust in me.

> *RQ1 asks: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?*

The greatest contributing source of data to help me answer this question comes from the first, filmed interviews. And through coding the interviews to derive common themes, watching and rewatching the dancers narrate their answers for the camera until I found the most indicative quotes for each theme, then writing voiceovers to describe each theme and choosing visual aids to accompany these themes, I have thoroughly responded to this research question. In other words, RQ1 is largely addressed through the documentary film – in appropriately audio/video format, and to spend the bulk of the text in this chapter distilling those understandings to type would be a disservice[25]. Then the point of this chapter becomes a description and analysis of the three-interview methodology (filmed interview, editorial interview, and exit interview) in answer the second research question.

[25] A full documentary script is included as Appendix D.

> *RQ2 asks: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?*

So the task set before me here is to describe the design, implementation, and feedback of the interview methods I employed within the documentary-driven methodology so that the reader can judge for her/himself whether they were appropriate and useful in generating better understandings about belly dancers' reflections upon their practices and identity projects.

**The Interview Topics**

According to Fontana and Prokos (2007), the traditional social science interview process is rooted in the masculine scientific tradition.

> Interviewing is a masculine paradigm that is embedded in a masculine culture and stresses masculine traits while at the same time excluding traits, such as sensitivity and emotionality that are culturally viewed as feminine traits (2007:62).

And as Ann Oakley points out, "there is no intimacy without reciprocity" (Fontana and Prokos 2007). Thus within feminist social science, we would hope to see a closer relationship developing between interviewer and interviewee. In The Belly Dancer Project, I approach interviewing as a shared experience, and encourage each dancer to elaborate as she pleases, (and of course to skip questions if she objects to them), or to otherwise take control of the interview if she feels comfortable doing so. This feminist directive is also the primary inspiration behind introducing the editorial interview into the documentary-driven methodology.

At this point, I invite the reader to review the list of interview topics presented to the dancers in their filmed interviews. I developed these topics after observing, participating-in, and writing about aspects of the belly dance phenomenon

for five years. The list of interview topics that I actually used in the interviews is included as Appendix B, but here, I have annotated the list with some notes about my reasoning behind each topic.

Interview Topics for Featured Dancers (in italics)
With my Motives/Direction for each Topic (plain type)

- *How long have you been belly dancing (BD)?*
- *And how did you get into BD?*
  History and contextualization of the dancer's experience with the belly dance (BD) phenomenon
- *How have you changed because of BD?*
- *How much of your identity or self is wrapped up in being a BD?*
- *How do you think you've changed as a BD as you've gotten older?*
  The dancer's dynamic experience with the BD phenomenon, and how her identity has changed because of BD
- *Do you think there's a big break between the 'BD World' and your everyday worlds?*
  Situating her involvement with BD within her everyday life, and how she moves between worlds and manages the multiple identities
- *How do you feel when you're dancing / costuming / listening to BD music, etc.?*
  The embodied and emotional experience of the different components of BD
- *Tell me about your relationships with other dancers.*
  The community/relational aspects of the BD phenomenon
- *Who in your life is most important to you?*
- *Tell me about your family/household.*
- *Do your parents/extended family play a big role in your life?*
  Relationships/community in all parts of the dancer's life important to her identity process (follow-ups included relationships outside of family)
- *What was your childhood like?*
  Key life history events that may impact identity construction (follow-up prompts extended this to previous adult history)

- *Overall, what activities or events (daily/weekly/yearly) are most important to you?*
  Prioritization of life events, and how BD is situated in this broader context

- *Tell me about your job(s).*

- *What parts of your work do you take the most pride in?*
  Occupational identity, and if/how that intersects with her BD identity (included how the dancer divulges her BD involvement to co-workers)

- *How does BD fit into the rest of your life?*
  Revisit how the dancer feels BD impacts her everyday life and identity

- *Tell me about your spirituality.*

- *How does that fit in with your BD practices?*
  Uncover the dancer's spiritual worldview, and ask if dancing is a spiritual experience for her

- *What types of things are you looking forward to right now?*

- *In the short term? Further down the road?*
  Goals, dreams, planning for the future, and projections of continual identity development

- *What is it like for you to be interviewed about these things?*
  Elicit immediate, in-situ feedback about the dancer's experience of the filmed interview

- *Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?*

- *What questions do you have for me?*
  Leave the dancer the 'last word' by ending with broad prompts

Overall, these topics worked well for all of the dancers. The dancers all took seriously the last questions in which I asked them to expand in any way they wanted to on any topic they wished. One dancer wanted to talk about the things she did not like about the belly dance phenomenon – concerning stylistic differences and competition among dancers in the belly dance community. Two of the featured

dancers spoke more about how much they loved the community of women and how much the women they danced with added to their overall well-being and positive feelings of being women. Another dancer wanted to add further nuance to her discussion of musicality, and her views of choreography. But in their editorial and exit interviews, I asked each of them again if there was anything I had missed in the topics we discussed. To this, I got a resounding, "no."

This said, the one question I didn't ask and have most certainly regretted, would have addressed belly dance as a conduit for sensual or sexual expression, as most of the literature even mentioning belly dance addresses this aspect of the phenomenon (see Dox 2005, 1997; Shay and Sellers-Young 2005, 2003). I suppose that this is an example of my own unconscious bias slipping into the research design, because I was certainly well aware of the predominant cultural stereotypes that belly dancers are "exotic dancers" or strippers. I was also well aware that most of the small body of literature about belly dance spends a great deal of type addressing this stereotype. And yet, perhaps in unconscious hopes of adding credibility to the belly dance phenomenon, I did not even give the featured dancers a chance to address the topic – even though their responses to other topics sometimes touched on it.

**Filming the Primary Interviews – Behind the Camera**

I would be amiss in discussing the experience of the interview methods if I left out the experience of physically filming the primary interviews – particularly because this process made all of the dancers more uncomfortable than the actual topics I presented them. So while my videographer and I were setting up the camera and lighting, and the dancer was reading the consent form to sign, I also provided her with the list of interview topics in order to help alleviate any anxiety of having

pop questions thrown at her. I didn't at first realize how anxious the women were, or how much seeing the questions beforehand reassured them and built trust between us in an otherwise stressful and fairly unnatural situation, but then quickly altered my approach for each dancer to address her concerns. One dancer quickly scanned through the topics, nodding confidently until she reached one topic and said, "oh no, we're not going to talk about that!" To this I responded calmly that I didn't want her to talk about anything she was uncomfortable with. During the interview, when I came to that topic, I asked her, "do you feel like talking about …?" and she smiled and said, "no, I don't feel like talking about that." I moved on to the next topic without pause, and only later began to understand how much my respecting the dancers' boundaries in this way developed deep and reciprocal trusting relationships.

Overall, it seemed as though the actual interview itself didn't cause nearly as much discomfort as did the camera, lighting, tie-clip microphone, and wiring/equipment that led to transforming what would have otherwise been a comfortable room in their house or my living room into an unnatural film set. To address this, I talked to the dancers constantly as my videographer did most of the set-up. I helped each woman thread the microphone through her shirt and situated her hair, earrings, etc. to be flattering. We joked around, and I told them as much as they wished to know about the production cycle. I sat 30-45 degrees off to one side of the camera and primary lights, and told them to try and pretend the camera wasn't there. And while, in three out of four cases the videographer remained in the room, he largely stayed out of their line of sight. I also sought to present the dancers with the interview topics, beginning with easy broad, contextualizing questions about their overall experience and history with belly dance – which quickly warmed them all to

what is obviously one of theirs and my favorite subjects. From there, the interviews seemed to unfold naturally and we addressed topics as they came-up.

**Editorial Interviews**

After we filmed each dancer's interview and were taking-down the equipment, we made a lot of the production decisions for the filming the dance footage, and then shot this as soon as we were able (a process discussed in Chapter 7). Then after each woman's filmed dance performance, I provided her with all of her interview and performance footage[26]. So for Terri, Mahin, and Nerissa, I burned DVDs for each dancer that included her raw interview footage and all takes of her performance footage (the wide/still camera footage only). I spent about two hours with each dancer, taking notes by hand and recording the editorial interview with an Olympus handheld digital audio recorder[27].

*Mahin*

I took a DVD to Mahin's house for the editorial interview, and we were joined by the primary – and internationally renowned – percussionist Gabby Tawil, who accompanied her in her taped performance and wanted to add his input on the best musical takes. The part of the editorial interview dedicated to the performance footage was frustrating and fairly disappointing because Mahin had brought three expert percussionists with her who, because they were unaccompanied by a flautist, were forced to play over pre-recorded music for all but one drum solo piece. Because of the recording set-up, we were unable to completely isolate the recorded music

[26] This step excluded my pilot participant, Shoshana, because I had already conducted this conversation with her informally in preparation of a ten-minute web-documentary of her interview and performance that was in a previous incarnation of the eventual documentary-driven methodology.
[27] When producing the film, I referenced my notes and the audio recordings, but the audio recordings of the editorial interviews have since been lost, so most of this section is written by referencing my notes.

from their individually mic'ed instruments, so in the finished film, I could only use the audio recording of the drum solo piece – a technical frustration I was unable to fully explain to Mahin or Mr. Tawil until they saw the footage in the editorial interview.

In her editorial interview, Mahin reiterated her current process of shifting her belly dance practice into more artistic arenas, student troupe developments, and developing a national name for herself. But the most significant emphasis that Mahin's editorial interview added to her original interview was how important it is for her to fully embody the dance and to "dance within the music, rather than on top of it." She spoke more about the value she places on the "spontaneity of creation" by dancing unchoreographed to live music, or alternatively to learning the story behind a historic piece of Egyptian music so that she can better spontaneously embody that music. She spoke more about continually seeking what she calls "golden moments," where she "goes internal" so much for a few minutes in a performance that the audience doesn't exist. For her, the belly dance phenomenon is about fully embodying the music as an art form – a passion that she spends 50-70 hours a week physically honing, teaching, performing, and marketing. At the time of the interview she was in school to become a physical therapist for dancers – another career choice that is strongly driven by her intuitive understanding of the dancer's body[28].

*Nerissa*

For Nerissa's editorial interview, also I took a DVD to her home, and we discussed the main themes emerging from her interview (e.g., her love of dancing

[28] At last word, she had put her plans for graduate school on hold, in order to capitalize on her dance career while she is in her prime performance years, but still had long-term plans for physical therapy.

with the veil, how her sewing hobby comes into play in belly dance, and her insecurities and stage fright before she performs). We also went through the three takes of performance footage that my cameraman and I had previously shot on our performance stage, to determine which footage she would like me to use in the finished documentary and which parts she did not want me to use.

In this session, Nerissa reiterated that the main draw she finds in the belly dance phenomenon is the community of women. In her words this is elevated to a form of spirituality by sharing important feelings and giving support to each other. She underlined this sense of community as developing her into a, "more outgoing person, with the strength to be a single woman." This goes along with much of her interview content, which centered on her relational identifications – family, career, boyfriend. The interpersonal identity trend was further developed in the exit interview, when she brought up the fact that her/Mahin's focus group hadn't spent very much time discussing elements to their identity external to the dance itself.

*Terri*

Because Terri lived roughly 150 miles away, I mailed her a DVD of her filmed interview and performance footage. She was caught by curiosity and watched it before we could discuss it on the phone, so I wasn't able to capture her initial reaction, but the interview still went quite well. In fact, Terri had already spent time with the footage, and had a list of talking-points to discuss about the interview and performance. As she is the leader/originator of her troupe and also quite accustomed to taking a leadership role at work, it was natural for her to direct the dynamic and agenda of the editorial interview, and I appreciated her strong and well-spoken opinions. Her primary form of dance is a group improvisation so each performance

take was very different from the others. During her performance, we also were shooting into the setting sun so much of the editorial interview was spent discussing the best quality performance footage.

The interview theme that surfaced with Terri went hand-in-hand with her placement of her troupe within her community. She also works as an intensive care nurse, and had developed a dance practice in which she not only nurtures troupe members and students but positions her troupe within the community to rouse support for community days, gay pride parades, environmental efforts, etc. The topics we spent the most time readdressing where the nuances of her feelings about community (leading and nurturing as opposed to mothering and enabling, etc.). She very much felt that her leadership has been honed in leading Troupe Salamat, and that belly dance fuels her emotional and spiritual growth by "waking-up the antiquity" with the physical movements and connecting with femininity back to the beginnings of time – as well as by connecting with her fellow dancers and the greater community now.

*Shoshana*

Although I did not complete an editorial interview with Shoshana to parallel the other dancers, my work with her in the past has clearly shown her primary identity to be within her family – eight children, and several grandchildren – so her belly dance troupe was taken into her world as an extension of that family. Unfortunately the documentary did not portray her in a group-improvisation performance (as is the norm in Tribal Style dance), because her troupe disbanded after we shot her dance footage. Yet prior to the disbanding, Shoshana had expressed in her filmed interview and elsewhere that her dance friends were her best

friends who provided her sanity in an escape from reality that is often overrun with family crisis and drama. I have often gotten the sense that Shoshana uses belly dance as a form of rebellion in her life. She likes to describe herself as a, "Judeo-Pagan-Hippie-Freak," participates in left-wing political organizations, and each time I talk to her, she is liberating herself in some small way from what could otherwise be a difficult life as a stay-at-home mother/grandmother in a very right-wing conservative town. Some early footage I shot of her, before the final documentary-driven methodology model coalesced, was of her daughter's twelfth birthday party when Shoshana staged a whole belly dance performance with more than 20 performers – including one well-known dancer and her pet python, and a troupe of Poi dancers swinging balls of fire around their bodies as they danced in her front yard for all the neighbors to see.

As I edited the film I talked to Shoshana, and she was always very happy to help. More so than the other featured dancers, I get the feeling that she has very much enjoyed the process of being a film star, and that my social science interest in belly dance – and her as a qualified expert on it – lends credibility to her chosen form of expression and rebellion. And if this is true, then I am thrilled.

**Filmed Interviews into Film Plot**

After I finished with the editorial interviews, I imported all of the video interviews into QSR NVivo (8) for coding. NVivo allows you to view the video and the transcript of that video, and code those two simultaneously (so that any coding attached to the transcript is also attached to the video itself, and if one or the other is

queried by code or text search, the query brings up both text and media[29]). The first step was then to transcribe the interviews and attach the first round of coding nodes that corresponds to the 25 interview questions. I then re-read/watched the interviews to document additional themes that emerged. Some of these themes were only present in one dancer's interview and one reference (I coded by paragraph) of that dancer's interview – other themes ended-up appearing in all of the interviews. Some of these emergent themes are as follows:

Table 1: Sample Emergent Themes in Film Production

| Theme | # Dancers Discussed | # Total Paragraphs |
|---|---|---|
| Authenticity | 2 | 6 |
| BD Style | 4 | 14 |
| Costuming | 4 | 7 |
| Choreography | 4 | 4 |
| Dance Community | 4 | 28 |
| Embodied Experience | 4 | 16 |
| Negative Side | 3 | 4 |

After these two rounds of coding, I isolated the most salient/novel/indicative themes. I isolated them in a node tree called segments in progress, and labeled each of these segment in progress nodes with EXACT TEXT – meaning that the node, "Embodied Experience EXACT TEXT" included all

[29] As I progressed, I used NVivo as a repository for much of the material generated by the documentary-driven methodology, so it eventually ended-up containing the documentary script, different takes of my voice-overs for the film, emails to the dancers, exit interviews, etc. Unfortunately much of what still remains attached linked to the NVivo file is just the text/transcripts, as I lost all of the multimedia materials during the separation/divorce from my videographer, and when I finally recovered them they are no longer in a form that can feasibly linked through NVivo.

sixteen paragraphs discussed by all four dancers. Then as I went through these original sixteen potential documentary sections, I narrowed down the number of sections to what I believed were the most central (and irredundant) nine of those isolated (to keep the documentary under one hour). Then by watching/reading all of the paragraph quotes in each potential segment node, I looked for the best two-to-four quotes to narrate the crux and breadth of that theme. While this was all fresh, I still mapped-out the voice-over for that section, named it, and decided if there would be any additional visual elements added to their filmed interviews for that section. NVivo also allowed me to tag the timestamps for all of the interview and performance footage that I wanted to include in the film, so that it was easy to communicate my exact intent to the videographer/editor during production.

Therefore, the Belly Dancer Project – in true phenomenological tradition – follows the directive that a researcher's goal ought to allow descriptive data to demonstrate itself, so that the consumer/interpreter of the research can experience and evaluate the data for her/himself. And while for ease of reference to the readers of this dissertation, a complete documentary transcript is provided as Appendix D, I again strongly encourage readers of this dissertation to view The Belly Dancer Project film before or during the reading of this work.

**Exit Interviews**

*Mahin*

After the dancers in Mahin's screening party left her house for the night, she and I sat on her couch to discuss her experience of the focus group, the film itself, the research process, and anything else she wanted to tell me. This unscripted exit interview lasted an hour and twenty minutes, and ended at two in the morning. Our

impressions of her lively focus group that we discussed in this interview are included in Chapter 8, but suffice it to say that her overall experience viewing the film was very positive. We spent most of the time in this exit interview discussing her belly dance career and her intent to develop a national teaching reputation. Since her original interview, she had decided to put-off physical therapy graduate school until she had completely capitalized on her peak performance years as a dancer. During this talk she was so excited about this that she even brought-out and showed me a DVD of a student group performance she took to Cairo Carnival (a national festival), because she was so proud of their combined efforts.

I confided in her to a much greater extent the medical, emotional, and legal issues that had caused delays in meeting my Belly Dancer Project progress goals and deadlines (something that had caused me a great deal of guilt throughout the process) – and received reassurance that to her, my occasional missed deadline was nothing to worry about, as it was "just a side project" for her. She in turn revealed a great deal of detail about her personal life and some of the traumatic events she had overcome – in part by using her passion for a highly autonomous, self-determined career in dance to pull her through. So by the time we had to close for the night, we hadn't spoken as much as I had planned about her experience of the research process. However, what emerged instead was very much a give-and-take conversation in which we uncovered an amazing amount about the value she places on her own autonomy, intellect, work ethic, and business ingenuity to follow her creativity in a successful career as a dancer. In Mahin's case, the exit interview added a substantial depth to my understanding of her identity development, as the cumulative trust I have built with her over the course of The Belly Dancer Project,

the unstructured interview format, the lack of video camera, and my own opening-up about personal hardships all together prompted her to lower her guard and speak off the cuff about a number of topics.

*Nerissa*

Nerissa attended Mahin's screening party rather than choosing to hold one of her own, and we arranged to hold her exit interview over the phone two days later. During that conversation we spoke for an hour and a half about her experience watching The Belly Dancer Project film, the focus group discussion, her experience with me throughout the documentary-driven methodology, her childhood, and many other things. She updated me on her current involvement in belly dance and various other hobbies, going into much more detail about her work with another pseudo-belly dancer on a variety of performing art projects, and about teaching/performing country-and-western dance with her boyfriend.

Several people who saw the film have admiringly remarked about how Nerissa had the courage to communicate more than any of the other featured dancers her insecurities and stage fright when dancing. And after getting to know her over the course of The Belly Dancer Project, I would describe Nerissa as having a quiet and firmly developed identity that she often expresses in relation to her loved ones and roles. She directly admitted in the filmed interview that not very much of her identity is wrapped-up in belly dance. She elaborated in the exit interview about always having a strong body image, and has no trouble quietly asserting her independence and skillfulness in a variety of creative, occupational, and performative venues. So even though she perhaps comes across as a more timid and insecure dancer than the other featured dancers, she continues to voluntarily put herself out

there in novel performance roles and venues, and overall does not let her stage fright keep her from trying new things.

In the exit interview she again revisited the theme of belly dance as a women's community, or what might even qualify as what Nancy Fraser (1993) has dubbed a "subaltern counterpublic." I believe that belly dance communities, as Nerissa experiences them, function much the same way that women's activist groups in Mexico do in strengthening individual identity. "The organizations are safe spaces for women. Women thus learn to speak and be heard in a place of relative equality, formulating identities and expressing their concerns first among themselves, before articulating these concerns in "the public sphere" (Palier 2000:4). Nerissa said that there isn't one single activity or accomplishment associated with belly dance that gives women self-confidence, but it is rather a result of the whole experience: being amongst a positive group of women every week, engaging in physical activity that is fun, building up the extroversion to be on-stage, expressing creativity through dance, music, and the crafting of costumes, etc. She felt that most women sadly don't ever get that close to other women, and that this sisterhood is what gives her a strong sense of self.

*Terri*

Terri's screening party happened during the first part of her troupe's semi-annual solstice gathering, where they come to have a luncheon and share personally with each other. I was invited into this gathering where we ate and watched the film, and I sat back and listened to them discuss the film. After they discussed it, I ducked out so that they could enjoy the rest of their meeting, and called Terri two days later to discuss the focus group and her experience with The Belly Dance Project overall.

Terri had been concerned about watching the film with her troupe because, in the time since we had conducted the filmed interview, she had restructured the troupe from a director-led troupe into a collective in which she retained a central creative leadership but now shared more of the administrative power. But after viewing it and seeing the positive resonance that the film generated amongst her troupe members, she remarked that, "I was surprised that even with all the changes that the crux was, the basics were still the basics. The questions you asked really went to the core of my experience with dance, so that didn't change much" (Terri Exit Interview). Along with this organizational change, we talked a lot about how she experiences belly dance differently now than she did as troupe director, and she said that she has regained her love of teaching – that her teaching has elevated to a new level and is more intentional.

I asked her, perhaps too often, if I had missed anything, or if there was anything she wished I had covered – something I probably did because she is such an articulate teacher and had asserted herself so confidently in the documentary-driven process all along the way, I had come to rely on her for feedback. However, she maintained that, "it would be hard to find an angle you didn't hit on." She rattled-off a number of the key themes we had been over in the interview, including ones that hadn't made it into the film, and told me, "you have been a good guide."

*Shoshana*

Unfortunately I have lost the recording of Shoshana's exit interview. However, I have stayed in contact with her, and she has made a number of copies of the film, giving them to friends. As of 2012, she has not returned to dancing.

Chapter 7

# PERFORMANCE AS IDENTITY ENACTMENT

> When (a) representation is explicitly said to be valuable because of the presence of the apparatus, the indexicality of the image – the image emerges as insufficient in itself. It must be explained, sense must be made, the very shape of the image requires verbal explication and pinpointing… The closer the image comes to being reduced to pure presence, the more it threatens to become unreadable and requires explication (Rosen1993:62).

> *RQ2: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?*

Performative text within an ethnographic study has been termed "ethnoperformance" by Marianne Paget, and it has the quality of anchoring the experience to the here and now (Denzin 1997). Dramaturgically speaking, ethnoperformances have actors, audiences, and shifting points of view that make them good contenders for better understanding these multiple points of view. In producing The Belly Dancer Project, I presented each of the four featured dancers with two direct, primary ways to communicate their identities vis-à-vis belly dance. The first of these was their verbal expression through the filmed interview (discussed in the previous chapter), and the second being dancing and co-producing a belly dance performance for the camera (the focus of this chapter). Because the phenomenon of belly dance is largely embodied and performative by nature, incorporating the ethnoperformance in some way into the methodology is extremely important. By utilizing an actual performance thusly, I go beyond Goffman's theoretical construct of everyday life as performance and interpret the performances as *performances* literally.

Victor Turner (1986) argues that performances as dramas are storied events, meaning that the performances are narratives that play with chronology and rearrange themselves into a complex multiplicity of storied events. This is no better seen than in the American belly dance performance, where the dancer expresses herself through an a-historical recreation of a dance form originating from cultures that are more often than not her own. She creates an authenticity for herself by pulling movements, music, and costumes differentially from locals and traditions that are historical/imagined/blended to complement her identity[30]. Norman Denzin states that, "the storied nature of these experiences continually raises the following questions: Whose story is being told (and made) here? Who is doing the telling? Who has the authority to make their telling stick?" (parentheses in original, 1997). Because The Belly Dancer Project, is at its core, about what Denzin calls, "the storied nature of these experiences," or in words more specific to this research project – "the ways belly dancers express themselves through their embodied experiences with the belly dance phenomenon" – I would like to pause and answer these questions.

In response to his question, "Whose story is being told (and made) here?" in this instance, the story being told is largely each featured dancer's, as she (more or less) is the one who combines dance elements, music, and styles into her own identity as a belly dancer. However, this individual expression of identity is mitigated

[30] Most often a dancer will choose a style of belly dance, and align herself with other women who share the same or similar stylistic norms. For instance, if a dancer is in a community of American cabaret dancers, she expresses her identity through the costumes, music, and largely individual dance performances that characterize this style of dance. A number of women begin dancing one style of belly dance, then as their identities grow in ways that may be incompatible with that style of dance, they will seek-out a new dance community more closely aligned with their developing identity needs. This could be for something as stylistic as a preference of the music or costuming used in another style of dance, or for a social element such as the degree of individuality/collective accountability as is seen between tribal and cabaret styles.

by agreed-upon mandates of her style of dance (for instance, by the broad but finite array of music from which she can choose to dance, the movement repertoire to which she is largely married, and the costuming choices which are also dictated by her style of dance). So the dancer is telling her own story in a language of dance dictated by her previous and current instructors, by the wider American belly dance community's agreed-upon rules, and, to a lesser extent, by the aesthetics of the myriad cultures that have imprinted the dance, including the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and various U.S. subcultures (bohemian, goth, Latina, hip-hop, etc.) – all depending on the style of dance she practices.

Returning to Denzin's quote, "Who is doing the telling?" the answer is the individual and/or group conducting the performance, as well as me, my videographer/editor, and my dissertation advisory committee. In the collective style of Tribal dance, the troupe leader and members together determine the guidelines for how each dancer can express herself. In Shoshana's case, she is a member of a Tribal fusion troupe, but she is not the leader, so it is only in her solo dances that she is the primary storyteller. Terri, on the other hand is the leader of her own Tribal *Troupe Salamat*, and though her troupe members have input, it is definitely her vision that the group enacts with each performance, and she who is doing the telling – or at least directing the telling. With Cabaret dancers such as Mahin and Nerissa, who typically dance solo, they are more clearly the ones doing the telling of their story. But as with all forms of dance, each Cabaret dancer brings on-stage with her bits of all of her teachers and other more indirect dance influences. So Nerissa is perhaps more influenced by her instructors than is Mahin, as she only rarely dances

professionally, whereas Mahin more often takes the role of teacher than of student – although she engages in both.

But, the classically-scientific answer to Denzin's question, "Who is doing the telling?" the answer would primarily be me, the researcher. And in many ways this is true in The Belly Dancer Project, because it is my research project, my production decisions and observations about the resulting stories that end-up in the research report, and at the end of the day it is my responsibility to make sure that the featured dancers' stories are told in a responsible, empowering, faithful way. Other key influential storytellers in this project are the videographer/editor, who informed me about what was and was not technically possible in the film production, and he who was responsible for carrying-out all of the technical visual production and artistic design that told the story of the belly dance phenomenon through an array of visual, audio, and editorial effects. And included in this list of storytellers must also be the members of my dissertation advisory committee along with other mentors, advisors, and colleagues who have offered advice on the research and production design so that it is now a much truer example of empowering feminist research that more fully incorporates the featured dancers' input into the production process so that I can now honestly answer, yes, I have made broad attempts to allow the featured dancers to do the telling.

Lastly, Denzin asks, "Who has the authority to make their telling stick?" This is a more difficult question to answer, as the authority does not rest solely with the dancer's intent – or even solely in her audience's assessment in her performance as pleasing, or authentic. Obviously the more technically competent the dancer, the more authority she has to make the telling stick, but this authority also rests with her

costume and music choice, her performance venue, her confidence as a performer, and countless elements outside of her control. Equally important is the audience's attention span, level of respect, preconceived notions, and knowledge of the dance form in allotting her the authority to tell her story. Hopefully the way the featured dancers in The Belly Dancer Project have been filmed, edited, and screened adds rather than detracts from their authority to tell their own stories, and make their telling stick. I have tried to create a professional, largely blank slate platform upon which the dancers can perform (though it was not always technically feasible or in fact theoretically possibly to do so). So in hopes of making the telling stick, the videography in this project was allotted a great deal of energy, because the nature of the captured dance is quite important in helping each dancer achieve authority in her storytelling.

As I continue to screen this film with various audiences, I try to always ask viewers, "which dancer did you resonate with the most?" And I have found that each viewer chooses a different one of the four featured dancers, for one of many different reasons. However, when I ask them, "why?" the answer is always preceded with a pause when the viewer is clearly trying to distill her/his emotional responses to the women into a voiced reason. This experience has led me to believe that it was in combining each dancer's interview footage with her performance footage – alongside other dancers whose verbal and performative stories contrast so starkly from hers – that culminated in a holistic telling of her story that gives her the strength and authority to make her story stick as being honest and true enough for viewers to identify/resonate with her.

**Desire to Embody the Dance**

If we are to discuss the performances of belly dancers as individual expressions and embodiment of identity, it is first necessary to ask about motive. Anthropologist Drid Williams answers the question of "why do people dance?" in six ways (2004). I talking to numerous belly dancers over the past years, I have found that their motives vary as widely as the colors of their costumes. As I will demonstrate here with quotes from dancers I have interviewed, Williams' categories do well to capture the dominant motivations that drive American belly dancers to dance – if taken with an additional seventh way: *they dance to experience sisterhood with other dancers – the dance as an embodiment of community*. To illustrate the rest of these motivations (2004:5-6), I will allow the women to speak for themselves:

1. *They dance solely because they want to have fun and relax – the dance as a vehicle solely for leisure and entertainment.*

> I always come out of any dance situation from a rehearsal to an actual show, I feel lifted, almost like there is a high going on. There are nights when I say, 'it's nearly eight o-clock, and I don't want to go to class. I'm tired.' But I make myself go, and when I get there, and I go, 'I'm so glad I went.' Because it just took all the bad things away. All of it, just in the matter of an hour. (It's amazing how that is.) Mm-Hmm. And I won't give it up for anything. I'll be 70 and I'll still be taking classes (Shoshana Filmed Interview).

2. *They dance because of biological, organismic, or instinctive needs of some kind – the dance as a precursor to spoken language, perhaps.*

> And what I think is that belly dancers and other esoteric dance -- flamenco does the same thing, ballet for some people -- it wakes up their antiquity. They realize there is something going on. It touches some part of them, and even if they can't articulate, or really express how they feel about it, it really wakes up the past for people. And I think it wakes up people's own sense of antiquity, they just don't know it. You know, Jamila Salimpour wrote a little booklet. It's called, "From Caves, to Cults, to Cabaret." And she talked about no movement is really an original movement. Every movement has been done by a human on the planet since the beginning of time. It's just

about how we string it together, and what we put up with. So when I read that, it really made me think about antiquity myself. People dancing in the cave, I mean dancing for every major aspect of life, from birth to death and everything in between -- puberty, childbirth, marriage, divorce, all of those things, we all danced. And it is only in the modern cultures that we have lost some of that. So I think that when people see belly dancing, that is awakened before them. That is the process that I see. And they may not be able to articulate it that way, but that is what I see when I am watching people watching dancing -- that is what I see happening (Terri Filmed Interview).

3. *They dance because they want to express themselves – the dance as a symbolic activity divorced from real life.*

It's kind of like making coffee. You know, you have coffee grounds and then you have water. And the coffee, you know, you can have different brews of coffee. You can have dark roast or you can have something else. And then you have water. Did you get tap water, did you get spring water, did you get filtered water, you know. What happens is that you've got YOU. You are like the coffee grounds, and some days you are dark, and some days you're happy, and some days you're tired, and some days you're full of energy. And the water is like the music. It's not the same every time, and what you wind up with in the cup at the end is a product of what you heard, and what you're feeling, and how it comes out. And so it's a little bit different every time, and I think that makes it unique and special. That's one of the things I love about live performance. And you can be that way with recorded music, if you are open to the music, and if your music has enough detail, and enough richness to it that when you're happy, you're picking up on all those little happy sounds in the music. Or when you're kind of feeling a little melancholy, that that violin just really calls out to you, and you use that...That's an important thing to me about dancing. I think that's one of the things that motivates me the most, is that ultimate creative process right there (she claps). Right there (Mahin Filmed Interview).

4. *They dance because they feel sexy, happy or sad, or something – the dance as a prime repository of emotion.*

Just me, I love to do veil. Maybe that has to do with the costuming, the sewing, I don't know, but I love to dance with the veil. And if I don't feel like dancing anything else, I love to do the veil. When I'm feeling very energetic, I love to do shimmies, and different things. It all depends on your mood, sometimes you feel like dancing slow, sometimes you want to go fast (Nerissa Filmed Interview).

5. *They dance because a good, or an evil, spirit has possessed them – the dance as a neurotic, hysterical, or quasi-religious manifestation.*

(The best exemplar quote I have about spiritual belly dance was given to me by a dancer I interviewed in California, Sadiyah. Here, she is explaining a performance called 'Chakra' on video, I ask about the two women draped in veils on the floor.) It symbolizes healing, it comes mainly from our veil therapy (veil therapy?) Yeah, for example, when Tatseena and her man split, we read poems and burned herbs, then she laid on the ground and we draped veils over her, one at a time. It's soothing to see the colors mix over your eyes. Then we pull them off one at a time, and the draping, the feel of the veils sliding over you is very healing. It's a healing group (Sadiyah, Ramsi Watkins, July 14, 2003).

6. *They dance to show off or to relieve their overburdened feelings – dancing as catharsis or as one of the governors on a steam-valve theory of human emotion.*

When I am dancing, I feel transported -- and not just performance either, just dancing. Dancing is a transformative process. If I'm feeling very, very cranky, usually just doing some hard, fast, sweat your butt off dancing works for me. If I'm feeling contemplative, and I really want to be quiet, then slow movement, which is where I feel my strengths are -- is in slow movement, I am a very fluid dancer. And I think it's just because being a triple Cancer I am really in touch with the emotional side of myself. There is something transformative about getting into costume. Every now and then, and I have shared this story with my dancers, and I know that I have shared it and heard it from others, is that you can feel like, 'aah, I just don't wanna, I don't know if I can do this.' Then you start to get into the costume, and the inner dancer steps forward. So once you start getting into the costume, and listening to the music, and then actually putting on the movement… I have danced with pneumonia. I have danced bleeding on stage, and was pretty much unaware, until I got off the stage. You know what I'm saying? It's just transformative, it takes you into a whole different space (Terri Filmed Interview).

7. *They dance to experience sisterhood with other dancers – the dance as an embodiment of community (which I have added to William's list of dance motivations).*

Right off the bat, in my experience of taking classes, I ran into a girl, TC, who was looking for any level of belly dancers to be in what might be a controversial type of art show, meaning that it was nontraditional music, and meaning that some people might not like it. I said, 'you know, why not?' I've never done anything my whole life, why not? We've done a lot of art shows, and we've had so much fun. And then design outrageous costumes. We have had a ball. (Being

> nontraditional belly dancers?) All kinds of dance. I would call it more of a theatrical type of dance, actually, with a belly dance flair. But we just had so much fun, as a group dancing... I just have one thing after another, of good experiences (Nerissa Filmed Interview).

This rich array of motives draws attention the fact that dance exists as a powerful expression of embodiment and as such, is a valuable practice to observe as a corporeal enactment of identity. It is important to remember that humans don't just have bodies, but arguably before and after the period when we are considered to be alive and human, we are bodies. By taking a phenomenological look at identity through their dance practice, I place the embodied experience of their costumed, dancing, interacting, watched selves at the center of the analysis. It is this double nature of the human being, according to Turner, that,

> expresses the ambiguity of human embodiment as both personal and impersonal, objective and subjective, social and natural… it precisely indicates the weakness of the Cartesian legacy in sociology, which has almost exclusively treated the human body as *Körper*, rather than both simultaneously *Körper* (the lived, experiential body) and *Leib* (the instrumental, institutionalized body). In approaching the body as an objective and impersonal structure, sociology has by implication relegated the body to the environmental conditions of social actions (Thomas 2003:29).

This type of corporeal-centric framing that marries theories of experiential/lived embodiment with the socially inscribed, externally observed, and symbolically encoded body has a direct effect on the study of dance within the context of the social sciences. Paul Schilder (1999[1935]) and other phenomenologists have argued that *Körper* and *Leib* cannot be separated, but must be studied together. The experiential and the cultural are inextricably entwined. So in viewing belly dancers' expressed reasons for dancing through the lens of William's motivations, we aren't surprised to see a comingling of cultural and emotive motives, and while pulling

meaningful examples categorically such as I have done here serves well to organize our understanding of the expressed motives, it does not serve to take the next step of teasing-apart the psychological experiences of embodiment from the internalized sociological meanings the women attach to their bodily practices.

**Performance Production (Behind-the-Camera)**

Shoshana was the first dancer filmed, and we did this at a restaurant with her dance troupe, *Hipnotic Hips*. In fact the footage that appears in the film is from my third attempt to tape Shoshana – the first being a troupe performance at another restaurant, and the second being a night performance at Shoshana's house for her daughter's birthday. For this third and final shooting, the lighting and camera were set-up while the restaurant was empty, and we agreed that the dancers would primarily be facing the cameras. But just before we began filming, the owner of the establishment came in and sat at 90 degree angle to the lighting and camera, which caused the dancers to likewise turn 90 degrees from the lighting, and the recording suffered. However we were able to accommodate this change to some degree, and from the entire performance footage, we were able to isolate video segments that at least captured Shoshana's solo dance – even though it was shot against a background of the restaurant's front door and hookah selection. The other unfortunate part of Shoshana's performance footage was that the troupe dissolved shortly after we shot it, and it became not only an uncomfortable situation to get consent from the other dancers to use their troupe footage; but just as importantly, it was apparent that using the troupe footage seemed inappropriate to me, as her membership in *Hipnotic Hips* was sadly no longer a central part of her identity.

While my videographer/editor and I were reviewing Shoshana's footage, I was also beginning to negotiate performance production decisions with the other three dancers. Terri in particular was adamant about my filming her *Troupe Salamat* a live performance, so that my cameras would capture her troupe dancing for an audience, in a more natural performance setting than exists in a staged setting built solely for camera. So I had to insist that she would be unhappy with the footage we could capture if we did it at a live performance – particularly as their upcoming performances were all at outside venues. However, I sympathized with Terri's strong feelings about the need for an audience – both because I am well familiar with the poststructural-inspired literature discussing the artificial representation produced by the camera's eye, and because I have experienced performing in both contexts myself. So we came up with a compromise that she would perform with a small coterie of dancers, but invite several other troupe members to the performance to serve as audience. What eventually transpired, though, was that Terri was unable to gather the audience dancers, so I stood beside the cameras to provide at least one smiling, engaged audience member for whom they could dance.

This performance took place on the side patio of Terri's house, in Prescott AZ (a town two hours north of the Phoenix Metropolitan Area), against a beautiful granite rock outcropping. At this point, my videographer and I had already constructed a black, U-shaped recording stage (described below), but were unable to it up anywhere on her property, and decided instead to film against the boulder background that was back-lit by the setting sun. This ended up working out well and was the most beautiful recording setting of the film, save for some noticeable auto-

focus problems that were the result of the multiple moving dancers against the sunset.

To explain the recording technology and homemade stage, I need to step-back a bit to just after my videographer and I shot Shoshana and reviewed her footage, to the point when it because evident that some production changes needed to be made for the three dancers yet to film. At this point (before we filmed Terri's Troupe Salamat), my videographer and I – under extreme budgetary constraints – went about constructing a full film stage and lighting rig for under 600 dollars. This ended-up being a ten-foot by ten-foot by twelve foot high space, with trussing to accommodate an array of barrel spotlighting along the top to provide front and back lighting for the dancers. Upon deciding that this stage backdrop ought to be black to be fully light-proof, I went to the fabric store and found heavy black vinyl (on sale). I then sewed a single black vinyl curtain 30 feet long to wrap all the way around sides and back of the U-shaped stage, and sixteen feet long in order to hang from the 12 feet trussing and be pulled along the floor to cover the interior of the stage. So then with front and back lighting adjustable on the trussing (so long as the dancers remained roughly in the middle of the stage), along with an additional flood (Kino Flo) light at the open front of the stage, we were able to set-up the stage tightly in our living-room and have Mahin and Nerissa film there. The filming was done with two studio-quality video cameras: Camera-A being a stationary wide-shot, and Camera-B used to take close-up shots of the dancers' muscle isolations and otherwise follow them around the stage. We were able to produce a much better-controlled recording environment than was achieved in Shoshana's restaurant footage or in Terri's outdoor footage.

Another important standardizing production decision that my videographer and I made after filming Shoshana, was to ask each dancer to prepare about fifteen minutes worth of material – which translated as three-to-five musical numbers (either choreographed or not, but using the same music for each number) – so that we could film the same material at least three times, in order to have several choices as to the best take to work with. In this way, we were able to give the dancers as many attempts as they liked to perfect each song that they had practiced – a decision that ultimately provided about 45 minutes worth of footage for each dancer and I to review in the editing interview, while only requiring that they prepare fifteen minutes worth of material, with the stress-alleviating reassurance that they could repeat each piece as many times as they liked. This in no way means that I asked the dancers to perform identically in all three takes – in fact I encouraged them to try different things each time. I also gave them the opportunity to repeat each number several times before moving to the next (which Mahin and Nerissa did because of their costume changes), or to dance the entire sequence several times as a show – which Terri's troupe wished to do. In Terri's case, Troupe Salamat danced three songs three different times, and each time they would decide on a different configuration of dancers for each song, and would even elect different dancers to dance/sit-out for each take. This ultimately led to a wide array of footage possibilities to choose from, but was limited by the lighting constraints and by the shotty camera-work of a second camera operator I recruited to take Camera-B footage.

**The Stories They Dance**

*Mahin*

All three times I interviewed her, Mahin talked about how important it is to her that she dance within the music, rather than on top of it. "It's kind of like a stream, you have to jump right in, and dance inside the music" (Mahin Filmed Interview). And of all four dancers in this project – and frankly of most dancers I have ever seen perform – she accomplishes this embodiment. If Terri's performance shows the audience a strong illustration of women becoming a collective "one" through their dancing bodies, Mahin's performance shows her audience a corporeal interpretation of the musical sound waves they hear and feel.

It was interesting to see her eyes become slightly unfocused as she predicted and channeled musical phrases and staccato punctuating beats into hundreds of muscle combinations. To say she did this effortlessly would be false, but rather she seemed to smile with the satisfaction of the challenge of it. One of Mahin's favorite teaching phrases is, "in the ears and out the hips." In this vein, watching her was very much like attending an improvisational concert where the audience sees the excitement in each musician as she simultaneously anticipates and embellishes what the other musicians are playing – layering her complexity and personality onto the collective spontaneous creation. And as with such musicians, her smile grew wider and her eyes sparkled more, the faster the tempo grew. In the drum solo (the only piece I filmed that was not played over the top of recorded music), the lead drummer, Gabby Tawil, had this same intense look on his face as his eyes channeled her movements into his hands.

In fact, Mahin did a very good job describing this experience to me when I first interviewed her for the documentary. To elicit a succinct phenomenological

'soap bubble' description of her belly dance embodiment, I just had to ask, "So how do you feel when you're dancing?"

> I'm just in it. You know? When a song – I love dancing to live music – and when the musicians that I dance with most often are playing the music that I really love, which I'm totally spoiled that I have that, because they will play anything for me that I ask. And when I have that, it's almost like the audience kind of doesn't exist, at that point. And that's okay for part of the show. It's okay, people appreciate that, that you go so internal for the parts of the music that really get you. And sometimes when you can get the emotion and take it right out to them, and you can bring it back to them. It's just consuming, which I think is the best word for it – it's really consuming. Because not only is it in your ears, it's in what you see around you, it's in what you feel in your body. It's everything. It becomes your whole sensory experience, and that's the best, those are the golden moments on stage (Mahin Filmed Interview).

*Terri*

Reviewing Troupe Salamat's 60-plus minutes of raw performance footage after working with the other dancers', I was struck anew at how much open, ongoing communication there was among the five women present. First and foremost this is displayed in the vocabulary and grammar of their dance moves. Terri has led her troupe to develop and catalog well over 100 movements – all with precise angles of limbs and body orientations, and exact timing with which to lead and follow movement sequences of 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64 counts. Talking to her since the performance, she has shared with me how they develop new movements. She and her troupe members are often finding inspiration in clips they've seen from other dancers or learned in workshops: one or more troupe members will break-down the movement, alter it to their liking, mirror it to work on both sides of the body, work it into a combo of some factor of 8 counts complete with a unique gesture cue to lead into and out of it, and then teach it to the troupe. Because every movement of every

muscle in every dancing member of Troupe Salamat is a constantly being observed, interpreted, and reacted-to by every other dancer on-stage, the movements are incredibly precise in timing and placement. The mesmerizing effect appears as though the dancers are telling each other a story on stage, in improvised unison, using full-body sign language.

The raw footage also reveals the amount of ongoing verbal dialogue (English, Arabic, and various noises) among the dancers before, while, and after they are dancing. At the recording, they performed the three-song sequence three times, and tried new arrangements of dancers, different number of dancers performing each song, and many different movement combos each take. In between most of the songs, and certainly every time there was a few minutes' break, Terri would lead the discussion of what formations should be formed during the next song. While they were dancing, the lead (the dancer giving the cues) rotated evenly, but Terri would often still give yips and sounds of encouragement, and she felt the most comfortable verbalizing quick helpful directions during the song. Even when she rotated off stage for a three- or foursome to dance, her keen posture, her proud and maternally-assessing gaze, and her fingers that were always emphasizing hip movements with zills, communicated her authority.

Terri's dance identity is tightly entwined with that of her role as nurturer, teacher, and leader. Likewise, her performative experience and her ongoing appreciative/critical assessment of her performance has become much more self-forgiving as she has developed a collective identity and is able to more dispassionately assess the group's performance on its technical merits rather than on personal, embodied feelings.

> And it was really one of the paradoxes when I first started dancing. I have shared with you that when I first started, I would feel like a queen, then I would look at a videotape and say, 'oh my goodness! I just look horrible!' And it wasn't really a paradox. And it's funny, because as the years have gone by, we will look at it (an old video) and say, 'ooh, that was a little sloppy, ooh I didn't do what I wanted at that marker,' or whatever. And now we look at that video, and say, 'that wasn't so bad!' So it's funny how over the years that changes (laughing) from, 'oh my God I felt like a queen but I looked horrible,' to, 'oh that felt... but looked good! OK!' So it's really interesting how that dynamic over time has changed (Terri Filmed Interview).

*Nerissa*

Nerissa's performance footage is comprised of five songs, two in which she dances with one or two veils, and she makes a costume change for the last two songs. She has repeatedly told me that above all, she loves to dance with the veil. In belly dance, a single veil is a three-yard long piece of ephemeral cloth such as light silk, and veil dances are generally more lyrical, free-flowing, and involve a great deal of spinning and gracefully maneuvering the veil through the air. Dancing with any prop gives the dancer something to occupy her attention and her audience's attention as well. I felt that Nerissa's best performance piece was the one in which she danced with a single veil, although for production reasons it did not end up in the documentary. In this piece, she artfully floats about the stage like a blue butterfly, and has a peaceful smile on her face, whereas in other songs her self-admitted stage-fright seemed to cloud her eyes.

> Now performing, I'm scared to death. I actually get physically sick for probably a week before the normal performance. If it's something I get short notice for, of course, it's just getting sick that day. (laughs) and of course having to go to the bathroom every five minutes before you go out… and I've been known to have the shakes so bad that my legs won't move. My first time on a stage ever, the room went black, and there was no noise for probably five or ten seconds. Everything went black for the first time I went on stage. I had never been on stage before my whole life. But I don't seem to get over that

> nervousness yet. (Maybe someday.) I hope so (Nerissa Filmed Interview).

Understanding Nerissa vis-à-vis her belly dance performance is a contradictory endeavor. On the one hand, she is very comfortable in her physical body – much more than most dancers I have met. She told me that this is from growing-up on a farm in Minnesota, running around all summer in a bikini. And she doesn't mind getting dance gigs for her figure and her hip-long head of hair. And yet, despite proudly wearing her beautiful but revealing, self-designed cabaret costumes, she told me that she does not associate the dance with sexuality a bit. To her, it is about feeling feminine, the fun of dressing-up in costume, dancing, and being associated with a community of women. And it is this combination of factors that she says is worth all of the nervousness and stomachaches. When I watch Nerissa's performance, I see steely determination in her eyes, and evidence that an exhibitionist confidence is developing in tandem with her repertoire of dance moves.

> Like I said, I'm more assured of myself. I'm not so afraid that, you know, tomorrow, "oh, I'm so afraid to do this," "I can't say anything," or "I can't try that…" I expose myself a lot more. And I'm kind of a perfectionist, and belly dancing is something (giggles), that is really humbling in that I can't reach perfection, but I can try. And the world isn't going to end if I don't, it's not going to end if I make a mistake. And it's teaching me that less than perfection is okay (Nerissa Filmed Interview).

*Shoshana*

At the time we filmed her performance, Shoshana was in a small, fairly relaxed Tribal Fusion troupe called *Hypnotic Hips*. The members were mostly assembled from students of the leader, Yasmina, and, save for a few pieces improvised in true Tribal fashion, many of the pieces they danced were modified from pieces she had previously taught in her city parks and recreation classes. At the

time (just before the troupe folded), they performed a couple times a month, and by rotating through the five-to-six members' solos and ensemble pieces, had enough material for a 60-90 minute show. Each member of the troupe was free to pursue the dance to the expertise level she chose, and often there were fairly wide stylistic differences among the dancers.

Shoshana's solo in this performance which ended up in the documentary, showcases her individuality as a dancer, and I believe allows her relationship with the dance to shine through. I have written in other chapters that Shoshana looks to belly dance for an exotic escape from her everyday monotony and for something purely fun to do with her best girlfriends. In this dance she is very much the self-proclaimed "ole-hippie" who gets to perform the part of an ancient pagan while in costume and on-stage. She thoroughly loves it and in this role, has grown as a dancer to a place where she is less concerned with outside approval than she is with her tribal sisterhood and the escapist experience belly dance creates.

> I've always been a very confident person, because you would have to be raising eight kids, but I was never confident out in front of people. I was more like, "let me hide over here." But not anymore, I'll be the first one right out there. If somebody says, "who wants to do a solo?" "I will. What do you want me to do?" … I think it just made me a stronger individual all the way around, but you do have to step up for yourself sometimes. You have to explain that you're not a stripper (Shoshana Filmed Interview).

This is not to say that Shoshana has completely overcome stage jitters, or that she doesn't devote many hours to practice. Rather she is able to work through the all-too-common, contradictory feelings of, "Look at me! Please look at me! I spent a lot of money on this costume. And I look hot! Don't look at me, quit looking

at me!" (Shoshana Filmed Interview) – and (like Nerissa), keep coming eagerly back to the stage.

**A Note on Performance Music**

Nicholas Cook argues that music and image on film must be interpreted together, as they are part of the same experience (Jarviluoma et al. 2003). Within The Belly Dancer Project, each dancer chose for herself the music that she felt best communicated her identity as a dancer. The documentary includes a broad array of styles of music chosen by the dancers, and is intended to create a context for each dancer. Overall, music choice in belly dance is one of the primary ways that dancers communicate their style of dance and their individuality within that style. For instance, the music Tribal dancers use is quite different from the music used by Egyptian Cabaret dancers. Mahin, an Egyptian Cabaret dancer, insists on dancing to live music whenever possible. This challenges her to collaboratively improvise with the musicians, resulting in a much different type of performance than is seen in a Cabaret routine choreographed to pre-recorded music and goes a long way to describing how she defines herself as a dancer. Similarly, Tribal dance now often incorporates a great deal of industrial, hip-hop, darkweave, goth, and electronic music. The music that accompanies Terri and *Troupe Salamat* in the piece at the end of the documentary likewise defines them as an edgy Tribal troupe. Shoshana's solo piece in the film is a traditional Arabic horn piece – but I have footage shot immediately after her solo of her and her troupe leader dancing the Gawazee dance to a music historically used by Romany gypsies in this street dance. And of the five pieces that Nerissa performed for me, two of them were inspired by high energy, electronic dance music. So by developing the score from music the dancers

contributed, I sought to use each dancer's chosen music to help extend her identity portrayal throughout the film.

Of course, each featured dancer's music choice and its contribution to her overall authority as a belly dancer in The Belly Dancer Project documentary can be embraced by or lost entirely on the audience of the film – the ways audience members connect to the belly dance phenomenon through the music they hear. And while it is my job as the researcher and film producer to facilitate understandings with all of the film's audience members through many careful production decisions; analytically speaking, the important point here is to understand the hypothetical concept of the perceiver. This is, "a theorized perceiver who can represent different identity categories, races, genders, social classes and sexual orientations" (Jarviluoma et al. 2003:87). In other words, the perceiver is the point of view from which the researcher seeks to analyze a film. To the perceiver of the film, the music, dance, costume, and the dancer's overall image are all intrinsically involved in creating understandings of that dancer's identity – and by extension, creating an understanding of the overarching belly dance phenomenon. The depth of these new understandings – of the success or failure of these portrayals on actual flesh-and-blood audience members rather than on theoretical perceivers is described in the Focus Group chapter to follow.

Chapter 8

# FOCUS GROUPS AS SHARED REFLECTION

> *RQ2: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?*

Triangulation is a buzz-word used in myriad ways within social science, and is a widely-used justification for incorporating focus groups into a multi-method design. In the broadest sense, all that is required of using focus groups for triangulation purposes is that they are a different, complementary mode of data collection used in conjunction with other methods (individual interviews, surveys, participant observation, etc.) to broaden and substantiate one's understanding of a social phenomenon. Michael Bloor et al. (2001) liken this use of focus groups within social science to that of replication across laboratory settings within the natural sciences, where triangulation is used as a validation procedure. Within the context of The Belly Dancer Project, the focus groups are not necessarily used to *replicate* the data generated in the interview and performance modes of data collection but to *reflect* upon that other data (generated throughout the documentary-driven methodology) and to allow for expansion on themes that arose during film production.

According to David Morgan (1997), within the context of a multi-method, qualitative study, the goal is to add to the other qualitative methods employed. "In these combined uses of qualitative methods, the goal is to use each method so that it contributes something unique to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study" (1997:3). This aim of generating something unique is the goal in The

Belly Dance Project in the form of unique quotes from additional dancers, a unique lens through which to view the understandings already generated using other methods, and a unique implementation of the focus group within the overarching documentary-driven methodology.

So in this case, the four featured dancers had initially been presented with a series of open topics during their filmed interviews to help them develop narratives of their own belly dance experiences. Once salient themes were identified and woven into a film, focus group participants (hosted by the four featured dancers) were presented with the resulting representations – which were largely narrated by the four featured dancers on-screen – and asked to discuss their own personal experiences and understandings in a second-level discussion.

According to Esther Madriz (2003), focus groups provide an entirely novel element when included in a feminist research study. "The focus group is a collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs" (2003:364). This runs contrary to the more individualistic research methods (the series of three interviews and performance production) that I took each dancer through while producing the film. The focus groups or screening parties also functioned as a much-needed social and celebratory bookend to the relative insular process of documentary production and editing.

**Tailored Focus Group Composition**

This focus group strategy is also different from that seen in most research designs in that I am not piecing together a group of strangers to represent x-demographic, in order to discuss an idea, theme, product, etc. (Bloor et al. 2001).

And there are a number of reasons why using focus groups in such a novel way in this study is a valid and appropriate choice. However, the *primary* reason for incorporating them into this multi-step research design is to allow each of the four featured dancers to first experience the documentary (and their own digital representations within it) surrounded by the group of people most likely to empathize with her reactions to the film. In planning these, I spoke with each of the featured dancers and urged her to compile the people most appropriate to her circumstance into her focus group. My hope was to develop an invitation list of several (five-to-ten) of their troupe members or fellow belly dance friends/peers/students to participate in a screening party of the documentary, complete with refreshments and a discussion of the movie. In practice, this led to focus groups cheering-on their respective featured dancer, and often validating/expanding-upon the perspectives she and the other featured dancers narrated by sharing their own similar or dissimilar experiences.

As will be discussed in the descriptions below, of the four featured dancers, only two were able to form textbook focus groups. Mahin, the professional Cabaret dancer, and president of the local *Middle East Culture and Dance Association* (MECDA) chapter, hand-chose eight other largely Cabaret dancers who represented a wide array of belly dance experiences and invited them into her home. Nerissa was also welcomed into this party, as she did not have a group of dancers that she felt comfortable assembling into a focus group and knew a number of the dancers present. Terri incorporated the screening/discussion into her troupe's semi-annual solstice gathering. There were nine women in attendance representing a sample of (Tribal) dancers with a much narrower variety of experiences than in Mahin's focus

group, due to the fact that they were all taught by Terri and shared the experience of troupe membership. The final dancer, Shoshana, was not currently dancing due to a troupe break-up that left her bitter and sad. She just invited one other former troupe member to watch the film in her kitchen with the two of us, but even with the two of them, a meaningful discussion of the film and its themes was achieved. I have not included a topical discussion of Shoshana's screening in this chapter alongside the other two because the circumstances did not permit a true discussion of belly dance identity themes .

"Focus groups are normally made up of people with certain common characteristics and similar levels of understanding of a topic, rather than aiming for diversity" (Litosseliti 2003:32). The role of compiling such a homogeneity among a group of participants typically rests on the researcher. However, due to the spirit of involving and empowering the research participants to help guide their own experiences of the research process, I chose to allow each dancer to compile her own focus group members. So the groups are by no means uniformly homogeneous in composition. But they do follow a widely held caution to prevent absolute cacophony, that the chosen members of a successful focus group must share some commonalities – and I have found that a shared participation in the belly dance phenomenon more than makes up for the countless individualities among the women.

So in retrospect, I find that in allowing each featured dancer to shape her own viewing experience, the resulting (two) focus groups quite accurately reflect a fair representation of the overall experience of these particular Cabaret and Tribal dance communities – and the overall level of experiential diversity among the belly

dancers with whom Mahin, Nerissa, and Terri most closely interact. Mahin regularly interacts with a wide array of dancers – mainly Cabaret – throughout Phoenix, who work together on projects, and certainly get along, but often are involved in their own projects, and are involved with the dance to a variety of degrees. She carefully hand-chose representatives from her dance circles – including advanced students, professional dancers, intermediate dancers, a musician, and two dancers who were not Cabaret. Nerissa is still primarily connected to the dance community through class participation, a few performance gigs, and dances most regularly with another participant in Mahin's focus group, whose dance pieces could only loosely be considered belly dance. Therefore, for her to situate herself as a guest of Mahin's focus group, rather than place herself in a position of authority (in addition to being featured on screen), was certainly appropriate and echoed her level of involvement and comfort in the belly dance community.

Terri, in allowing me to screen the film at the beginning of their semi-annual afternoon of personal sharing as a troupe, ensured there would be good attendance by her troupe members on an occasion where the women were accustomed to sharing with each other in an intimate and relaxed setting. That her focus group drew from a much more closely-knit coterie of dancers – several of whom had only ever taken dance lessons from Terri – was also perfectly appropriate, as she is located in a fairly isolated small town where they are pretty much the only game in town when it comes to a community of belly dancers.

And Shoshana, in her unique place having just quit dancing and dropping almost all ties with the dance, invited the one remaining dancer in Phoenix with whom she maintains contact. The two of them had danced together for a number of

years in the same parks and recreation department classes where I met them in 2002 and first became personally and academically interested in belly dance. I had watched them form the *Hypnotic Hips* troupe with our fellow classmates and teacher, and I declined their invitation to join their troupe, because I had moved to another part of the valley around 2005. I remained in contact with them while they danced as a troupe – filming several events where they danced as a troupe, and then finally showing them the finished film after they had both left the belly dance community for the same reason.

**Tapping the Community**

> As a Latina feminist researcher, I regard the use of focus groups as a form of collective testimony. "Multivocal conversations" have been used by women for generations in the form of exchanges with their mothers, sisters, and female neighbors and friends…these dialogues have traditionally been a major way in which women have faced their social isolation and their oppression. The interaction occurring within the group accentuates empathy and commonality of experiences and fosters self-disclosure and self-validation (Madriz 2003:374-375).

As Madriz states here, by utilizing preexisting groups of women who in some ways already rely on each other as access points to a network of dancers, as sources of moral and emotional support, and for information/instruction on the most up-to-date belly dance trends, I am validating and documenting those relationships through the focus group activity. I also draw more voices into the hitherto individual unit of analysis, so that the research project resting on four case studies can be corroborated or disputed by each featured dancer's immediate community. Built into this model also is a means of sharing understandings about the belly dance phenomenon with the focus group participants by drawing their attention to the commonalities the four featured dancers share. In this way, the focus groups act as a consciousness-raising

activity for all focus group members in attendance. My hope in this is to give back something to the featured dancers and the focus group members at a group level as well as at the individual level.

According to Edward Fern (2001), the type of focus group I have conducted falls into the experiential task of the method. This type of focus group tends to "draw out shared life experiences rather than those that are unique or unshared" (2001:8). He believes that experiential focus groups are best employed when the group composition is homogeneous with respect to given characteristics (in this case, shared belly dance experiences), and are used to uncover everyday knowledge important *for its own value* rather than for aggregating or producing higher-order theoretical constructs. They are also used when the researcher wants to triangulate results generated by other methods by theory confirmation, or comparing group opinions and knowledge to the researcher's prior beliefs, based on previously generated data (Fern 2001).

In the case of The Belly Dancer Project focus groups, discussions naturally developed into shared experiences of with the belly dance phenomenon. My decision to use pre-existing groups allowed for greater commonality among the dancers, as their eligibility for focus group membership depended largely on their specific form of belly dance and their relationship to a single person (Mahin or Terri). These groupings by stylistic commonality or troupe membership allowed for more nuanced discussions of their experiences within those narrowed slices of the phenomenon. For instance, one divide I wanted to avoid straddling in the focus groups is that between Cabaret and Tribal dance, as this is perhaps the biggest distinction the belly dancers I have met make in identifying themselves as dancers. What becomes clear in

the discussion of the two focus groups below is that the two forms of dance are fueled by very different individual motives and identity needs. For instance, some women find much satisfaction in the communal atmosphere of Tribal style, and therefore pursue networks of dancers who share those values. Other dancers prefer the more independent expression of Cabaret style belly dance and form more loosely-defined circles of friends and peers within the dance world. This stylistic grouping within focus groups allows for a deeper and more honest discussion of shared experiences within the two styles than would focus groups of mixed styles of belly dancers.

These experiential focus groups are also used to triangulate results by means of theory confirmation. This is one of the main reasons they are employed as such in this study, because in the preceding steps of the documentary-driven methodology each featured dancer was interviewed for 45-90 minutes and filmed in roughly 45-60 minutes of performance footage. I then reviewed/coded all of the combined footage in order to condense into thematic sections to be explained in the documentary. However, by reducing more than eight hours of footage into less than an hour, several less-substantiated themes were cut, and many of the subtle nuances of their stories were lost. Also, I had only just begun building a relationship with Terri, Mahin, and Nerissa when we filmed their interviews, and many of the themes they discussed in those first interviews were much expanded throughout the course of the project. Focus groups then offered me the chance to examine and explain themes which are just touched upon in the initial filmed interviews. And because the featured dancers hosted the screening parties, they felt quite comfortable expanding on or clarifying points they had initially made – something they also did with me

one-on-one in the editorial interview, the exit interview, and in other phone conversations since their initial interviews were taped.

Edward Fern (2001) is one methodologist who discusses the effects of involving men versus women in focus group research. He focuses on the differences in self-disclosure (about which there is no consensus in the literature). He generally agrees with other researchers that women typically disclose more than do men in single-sexed focus groups due to differential norms of reciprocity. He goes on to say that men and women in the U.S. today are brought up with different cultural values, and that women are therefore more likely to talk more about intimate topics, to disclose feelings of vulnerability, and to provide emotional support to each other during these disclosures. He attributes this to a more collectivist culture than men typically experience. This sentiment is echoed by Madriz, who advocates the use of focus groups in feminist research because when they are "used by women… to unveil specific and little-researched aspects of women's daily existences, their feelings, attitudes, hopes, and dreams," they open up a window into the most important sociological process: the collective human interaction (2003:365). So this is certainly a good thing for the present study.

**Focus Group Structure and Facilitator Moderation**

According to Morgan (1997), there are several rules of thumb for successful focus group design – nearly all of which I intentionally disregard. These rules advocate, (a) using homogeneous strangers as participants, (b) relying on a relatively structured interview and a high moderator involvement, (c) having six-to-ten participants per group, and (d) having a total of three-to-five groups per project. It should be noted that he does identify these as being rules of thumb, should be taken

as averages and modified to suit the study at hand. I did not compile homogeneous groups of strangers for reasons I have already discussed. I also felt that in order to empower the featured dancers and other women present, and to observe the natural group dynamic, I should not exert a strong personal presence in the screening or discussion. So instead, I prepared for each group by developing a worst-case-scenario structured discussion to resort to in case the participation level and extroversion of the group did not cover key topics. However, as a passive moderator, I was happy to mostly sit back and allow my audio recorder to capture the active discussions that I only intermittently shaped with a prompt. I did try to assemble four focus groups, and suggested that the dancers who were able (Terri and Mahin) invite five or ten close dance acquaintances for the event; I ended up with two focus groups, containing eight and ten participants respectively.

In planning my focus group strategy, I was more inclined to follow the advice of Bloor et al. (2001), who have several insightful things to say about the role of the group moderator, or as they prefer to call her, facilitator. The first is that the facilitator's job is not to control the interaction as she does in the context of an interview, but rather facilitate the discussion. "(A) facilitator who seeks to control certain focus groups may be doing the study a disservice: if the aim is to facilitate group interaction in such a way as to understand group norms and meanings, then the group interaction of certain groups may be distorted by too much external control" (2001:48-49). In this case, where focus groups function as pre-existing communities of dancers, the shared norms and meanings of the group are of primary interest, as the groups add meaning to the documentary containing one of their members. On the other hand, "The focus group facilitator is not a marginal figure to

the group, as an ethnographer might be. But the ideal relationship of the facilitator to her group members, is that of a background figure, not a foreground figure – the theatre manager rather than the director of the play" (Bloor et al. 2001:49).

I took the role of a student receiving feedback from a panel of experts – throwing-out occasional questions as each group found different themes that they felt needed to be discussed and explained to me from a (Cabaret or Tribal) perspective – and laughed as their explanations sometimes contained digs at other styles of dance or people who indiscriminately blended styles. My involvement style as a passive moderator shifted quite dramatically from group to group, from completely deferring to Terri as she led the discussion and called on troupe members who had not spoken; to Mahin/Nerissa's group in which they both let the other women lead the discussion, and several dominant voices shaped much of the discussion and still managed to cover to key aspects of the Cabaret experience; to Shoshana's "group" of two, in which I took a much more active role, awkwardly probing for details about their previous involvement before and after their troupe's dissolution when conversation trailed-off or we were interrupted. So in the end, the focus groups did live up to my hope of empowering the featured dancers to step-up and shape their own experience in The Belly Dancer Project, as well as my hope of successfully applying social science research methods to creatively meet the needs of the research participants.

**Organizing Focus Group Data**

It is necessary to debrief participants about their experience in the focus group, and about how their information will be used in the course of the rest of the research study. I did this in several ways. First, before the screening, each focus

group participant was given two copies of a release form (one to sign and give me, one to keep – See Appendix A). In this, I verbally explained/outlined The Belly Dancer Project and my aims of creating a very empowering experience for the dancers throughout the process. Immediately after the viewing, members of Mahin's group wanted to discuss my methodology and research aims in depth, so I spent ten minutes happily answering all of their questions before we began the true discussion. Terri's group began with technical critiques of the film, which also led into a short narrative of the methodological process. After the discussion, I sent each dancer home with a largely short-answer, mail-in survey which included questions similar to those I originally asked the featured dancers, but response rates were low and I have not included an analysis of that data here.

When interpreting focus group data, most authors advocate transcription before interpretation or analysis (especially those texts whose authors use focus groups to supplement quantitative data or employ conversation analysis), but some texts (see Litosseliti 2003) state that transcription is not always necessary. In some cases, it is sufficient to produce abridged transcripts and a debriefing report (and to this I add my field notes from the focus group experience). My goals for the focus group component of this documentary-driven methodology drove my decision to import the audio recordings of the focus groups into QSR NVivo software in order to listen to them repeatedly before coding certain quotations that best exhibit certain thematic developments and supplementations to the other methods' results. Because of my emphasis on capturing the participants' experiences with the documentary in the context of the focus group, I feel that working with the audio recording rather than moving too quickly to written transcription (which is admittedly easier to code

and quote) has resulted in a better connection with the focus group dynamics and understated nuances in the tone of discussion. Field notes that I took just after the focus groups add to the overall quality of the abridged transcription and add to the overall story told by the focus group experience.

What follows is the description of the major themes that emerged from Mahin and Nerissa's focus group and then Terri's focus group. One of the things that becomes most interesting to me, in describing these two discussions side-by-side, is how differently the Cabaret and Tribal women frame their motivations for the dance – something that I acknowledged but perhaps downplayed in the film by emphasizing commonalities among the featured dancers and divisions along other experiential lines (level of involvement, personality, etc.). Both groups spent a great deal of time talking about the community of dancers they belong to, and I noted that nearly every comment made in both groups is shaped by their experiences and identifications with their dance community and that community's norms and values. This could partly be because they were engaged in a shared, multivocal discussion of the things that that impact the collective *them*. However, the fact that these very personal, individually embodied feelings were so readily echoed by other women in the group substantiated my understanding that these personal feelings are largely developed through their participation in the overarching belly dance *phenomenon*.

**Mahin and Nerissa's Focus Group – Cabaret Belly Dancers**

After the film was over, they asked me to explain, in quite a lot of detail, The Belly Dancer Project. They wanted to know my research questions (being that there were a couple of academics in the group), and wanted to know the research process, step-by-step. I was happy to oblige, and emphasized my intent to make this film for

as well as about the belly dancers who participated. I then opened up the discussion by asking broadly what their overall impressions were of the film. From this point, I largely sat back and listened as they ran the gambit of topics they felt like discussing.

The first things they talked about – that resurfaced in several ways throughout the discussion – involved dynamics of the Cabaret vs. Tribal belly dance communities. One dancer said that she never takes her husband to dance events, and that he isn't really interested – especially in the Tribal dancers that she finds so fascinating to watch – because those women aren't dancing for the audience. Several women in this group of primarily Cabaret dancers embellished on this sentiment to converge on the point that Tribal women dance for themselves and each other (whereas they themselves dance for themselves and for the audience). One said that Tribal dance feels like watching a sacred dance that the dancers are generous enough to allow the audience in on, and one focus group participant who had danced Tribal said that it alleviates stage fright, and the presence or absence of an audience is in fact a secondary consideration in the experience of dancing. I was asked to clarify what I meant by the term identity needs, and they adopted the term in believing that women who dance Tribal are most likely seeking different qualities from the dance to fulfill different identity needs.

They contrasted these motives with Cabaret dance, which they agreed served different identity needs (again their adopted term). When dancing Cabaret style belly dance, several of the more experienced group members said that when they were on-stage they were mainly dancing with the musical nuances and with the audience (although professional-level members disagreed on the use of the sometimes pejorative term entertainer although they readily own that act as a large part of what

they do when they dance). To make sense of this, one dancer with some training in psychological theory spent minutes convincing several other hesitant women that we each form our identities in large part from other people's reactions to us. So she believes that women who go into Cabaret dance are seeking the reactions they elicit from their audiences, that Tribal dancers seek the sisterly affirmation they see in the women with whom they dance, that women who dance for their partners are after those appreciative reactions, and that women who only ever take classes and never perform still look for the affirming smiles from their teachers and classmates.

The conversation ranged over other internal and external motivations for dancing. One woman explained that she was raised in a very conservatively religious family and has a rather straight-laced job; she said

> So dance, for me, gives me a space to sexually express myself or be sensual and still be OK with it. Every woman needs to express her sensuality in a way, because that's a part of all of us. Belly dance is not an alter ego, but it gives me a platform to say, "I'm a sexual being too," dance gives me that, that I was never permitted in another way (Cabaret Focus Group).

This focus group much more comfortably ranged into topics tangential to the sexual nature of the dance than does the Tribal focus group described below. They discussed their collective dislike of the widespread expectation that belly dancers should accept tips on their bodies, and talked about how they often did it anyway, talking about individual boundaries on where they draw the line (receiving tips at the side of the belt only, describing times they had been violated while receiving tips and how they had dealt with it). One dancer said that her boyfriend, a long-time friend of Mahin's, would not make eye contact with Mahin when she was in costume, and still refused to tip her, despite prodding and teasing from both

women. Both Cabaret and Tribal groups talked adamantly about the need to define belly dance as being very different from stripping or exotic dance, and repeatedly voiced their dedication to increasing the credibility of the name of belly dance.

This entire discussion was framed by the dancers' own embodied experiences and by their acute observations of other dancers, which sparked several echoing sideline comments about the incredibly captivating but non-sexual allure of watching other women dance, and how taking lessons and learning to dance has made them appreciate and enjoy watching other dancers to a much larger degree. Belly dancers of both styles watch each other more closely – both critically and appreciatively – than do other audience members, and both groups talked about how it is a good thing that belly dance has become its own self-sustaining economy (belly dancers buying wares, costumes, workshops, and videos from each other), because the market for performances at restaurants has almost dissolved.

Turning this discussion around to the negative side, they also addressed what is often a criticism of Cabaret dance – the competitive and sometimes "catty" nature of the relationships among dancers. One dancer who has obviously given this much previous thought, speculated that this negatively competitive atmosphere is only an exaggeration of what women do all the time.

> How many times do you go into the gym, and you're getting changed in the locker room, and you see someone else's body and say, "I wish I had her rear end, her boobs, or whatever." You don't even have to be at the gym. Everywhere we go, we compare ourselves to other women. Don't we all? Then you take an industry – especially in Cabaret – where it's an industry where no matter how good of a dancer you are, a lot of marketability in entertainment dancing is focused on what size your body is, and how old you are, and all that stuff. You are directly taking all of these things that are women's hot buttons, and you're throwing them into this marketing situation

> where they are competing for these things that women are most insecure about (Cabaret Focus Group).

So it is this dynamic, several members agreed, that shapes the nature of this cattiness.

One other interesting issue that surfaced here, but wasn't represented in the finished documentary (although it had appeared in a couple of the dancers' un-cut filmed interviews), was the often uneasy intersection of belly dance and the dancers' relationships with men. Three dancers in the group had had ex-husbands/boyfriends who told them they could take as many lessons as they liked, but they would never perform for anyone else. They discussed the difference between being with a man who came into the relationship knowing that the woman was a dancer, knowing what he was getting into, and ending-up with successful, respectful relationships; contrasting those experiences sharply with relationships that dissolved as the women became dancers, devoted increasing amounts of time to the dance, and began performing. One woman likened this to men who married originally overweight women who later lost 50 or more pounds. In her analogy, the man, "wouldn't know what to do with her in the new way she acted and felt, so he would leave." There were several examples of women in the group who now have very respectful, appreciative, and male partners who support them, or even pay for their belly dance lessons because, "he knows it makes me feel great." One woman said, "It takes a lot of confidence for a man to have his wife or his girlfriend out there… that's a quality you start to look for in a man." However they also acknowledged the difference between a partner who dislikes his wife/girlfriend belly dancing for controlling/insecurity reasons, and a partner who has to deal with constant missed evenings, dinner alone, and frequently finding baby sitters because his wife/girlfriend

is always performing (creating what I have frequently heard called a belly dance widow). There were guilty looks around the room at this point, and admissions that there is a delicate balance between relationships with a man and with belly dance that needs to be met.

**Terri's Focus Group – *Troupe Salamat*, Tribal Belly Dancers**

Being that I screened the film at the beginning of Troupe Salamat's semiannual Solstice gathering, I knew ahead of time that I had been allotted 45 minutes for discussion before they got onto other things. Here there was not the long explanation of the research methods and overall aims like I was asked to provide in Mahin/Nerissa's group; rather they immediately jumped into helpful technical critiques about sound levels, lighting, and voiceover before Terri directed the conversation into a thematic discussion. Although they initially felt that more clarification about specific movement and terminology differences between Tribal and Cabaret styles needed to be explained in my film, they seemed to agree that if my aim with the film was to portray the stories of four women who belly dance to a primarily belly dance film audience, then I didn't necessarily need to concern myself as much with educating the general public about belly dance.

This group of Tribal belly dancers obviously regularly spends a fair bit of time discussing belly dance's contextual placement within U.S. society from a feminist perspective. Even more so than the Cabaret focus group dancers, they spoke about their drive to educate the public about the many ways belly dance (and more specifically Tribal dance) is different than the acts of stripping or just dancing a random amalgam of sensuous movements. The group sentiment was at one point clearly explained to me in a vehement over-talking of voices, that,

> If someone asks you where belly dance comes from, you'd better be responsible and respond to that. You can't go around being a belly dancer and be completely ignorant about where it comes from, what it means, what you're doing, the mission statement for your troupe (I interject: "and your feminist philosophy, however well-developed that is").
>
> Exactly. It's almost a way to bring-in feminism, because belly dance is in some ways actually more acceptable than some of the deeper principles we're bringing into people's lives. And it's almost like an entrée into all of that. It makes feminism so approachable, because me 20 years ago, I thought feminism was a bunch of crazy women dancing naked around a fire in the forest, which I now think is not such a bad thing (all laughing)… Or feminism when I grew up, was that we're going to dress like men, act like men and, "don't you dare open a door for me," and that's not what feminism is at all! Although if you don't want someone to open the door, you'd better make sure you get there first, Goddamnit! (Tribal Focus Group).

Several members talked about how much they are or aren't able to carry-through their belly dance identity into all aspects of their lives, and excuses were made for several members who had to hide their belly dance involvement in a masculine workplace, saying, "That's OK, it's not a wall in you, it's you recognizing an objective reality you're walking into, where other people are going to judge it. And that's just common sense but not something in you – it's external separation." They were very upset that Shoshana had spoken about how belly dance permeates her entire identity but was able to just quit completely when her troupe broke-up. I told them that when I had shown Shoshana the film with a former troupe member, they had agreed to meet for a dance date, and that her house was still completely decorated with Middle Eastern art and knick-knacks, and that her Facebook still bore the belly dance identifications. This reassured them and allowed her behavior to fit into their understanding that if someone belly dances with that level of passion, it is part of who they are and one doesn't stop being a belly dancer when they leave the

stage or quit dancing for a few years. To them this meant that Shoshana still retained the belly dancer somewhere deep inside.

As I predicted, a great deal of the discussion revolved around the strong sense of women's community in the troupe setting and in Tribal dance in general. Seeing a couple of troupe members in the film who had since moved away brought out comments about the psychic connection they feel with former troupe members, and how losing them was not a loss but a way to spread Troupe Salamat to other parts of the country. Terri referred to the whirlpool metaphor of the troupe, with its members and herself being the water molecules circling for varying lengths of time, and they agreed that the troupe is bigger than any one of them. They proved the Cabaret dancers' speculations correct, in happily describing how they dance for each other like imagined (feminized) birds of paradise preening for each other, and that they were drawn to Tribal because of the safety in numbers. Several members had disliked past experiences in Cabaret classes with its emphasis on the individual and were pleasantly surprised to hear Mahin and Nerissa in the film talk so much about the importance of community in their own experiences with Cabaret belly dance.

Apparently they had spoken before about how a number of the troupe members had experienced difficulty developing good, fulfilling, trustworthy relationships with other women prior to belly dancing, and they reiterated this point. One member felt that over the years she had developed the deepest and most honest relationships with other belly dancers – not because she had necessarily danced with them, but because of the culture of belly dance. This feeling was echoed by sentiments that anywhere the women go, they know that they will be accepted by belly dancers. One participant said,

> I was scared to walk into a room full of women because I was previously a marine and forced into a group of 60 women in boot camp, and that changed me forever. It was extremely competitive, and it was completely a physical environment and judged by your physical prowess – and that is a completely different environment. So I expected to walk in the door with (friend) and the women all be competing with each other, and when they weren't, I kinda didn't know how to handle that. At first I had such a difficult time looking at myself in the mirror that I would leave class half-way through crying – and then one class, Terri walked up and fucking zerberked my belly (roaring laughing), and I never had a problem after that. It was really powerful (Tribal Focus Group).

Another woman wished I could have drawn all four of my featured dancers together into one room and taped that meeting, so that she could see the connection among them – something I was regrettably unable to do. And by the response she received for her reasoning behind this request, I felt that she succinctly summed-up the spiritual sense of community and individually-experienced permeating belly dance identity that the troupe had been describing for the entire preceding discussion.

> There's something there that is a collective unconscious – and I don't even want to call it a well, but an ocean – in this form of dance. It was there in those female fertility dances with the women drumming round a fire, and there will be something like this far into the future, and all of the women who have danced it share that. So when I dance, I feel this huge connection, and yet at the same time it's mine. It is my particular expression of it. Everyone here can do the same moves, and yet it's each of ours. And the word priestess is what that means. You are the embodiment of this thing that is ancient and archetypal, and way bigger than you, and yet it is your particular expression of it. And I felt that each of the women in your film have had the same experience, but would probably describe it differently. And I feel that it is such a huge, literal phenomenon you feel when you're dancing. And that for me is the addictive part of dance: the connection (Tribal Focus Group).

**Understandings about Community**

So to close, when I first decided to include focus groups in this documentary-driven methodology, I didn't predict the types of understandings that comparing these two groups of women side-by-side in this way would produce. Even when I staged the focus groups, I didn't make many of these connections. However, it is in listening to the two groups of women over and over again, in organizing the themes, and describing them here, that I am able to broaden my understanding of women's identity development vis-à-vis the belly dance phenomenon. I now give full credit to the impact that their belly dance communities (and their communities' values) have on their individual senses of wellbeing, and on their motives to continue dedicating such large amounts of time, energy, and emotion to belly dance. Community most certainly works differently on these women depending on which type of community they belong to (Cabaret, Tribal, and the countless regional, local, and immediate communities within those broad categories). It is clear that a sense of shared values and experiences is at work in helping women shape themselves, *and* it is important to these women that those values and experiences are *shared*.

I discovered a methodological extension of this theme in that it would have been impossible for me to develop understandings of identity with the four dancers if I had not already spent a great deal of time in the belly dance community. It was very important in forming all of the relationships I developed, that I shared their love of the dance, their community norms, and that I was willing to take the time to get to know each dancer individually in a level, reciprocal way. This is one of many ways that my research philosophy and design yielded rewarding results.

Further reflections on the theme of community have led to higher level understandings about how the nature of belly dance community empowers individual dancers. By drawing on focus group discussions, individual interviews, and participant observations, I have come to understand this extremely spectacular subculture (Hebdige 1979) – with its strong performative displays of orientalist-inspired femininity – in terms of Nancy Fraser's subaltern counterpublics (1993). Across the board dancers describe the self-confidence and emancipation they derive from belly dance as coming from the sisterly bonding that occurs behind closed doors. I have heard more dancers than I can count describe the connection they feel with women in the Middle East who find liberation by dancing for each other in private spaces.

Subaltern counterpublics are safe spaces where women can develop self-confidence, strengthen their public personas, and try-on new identities before going out into the world to field test these new aspects of themselves. I believe that belly dance has such a profoundly strengthening effect on women because they voluntarily undergo the tempering process of oscillating between strongly fortifying women's spaces and the very spectacular performance venues where they display their art. By placing themselves on display so controversially, they not only invite criticism of their bodies, dance skills, and costume/music aesthetics, but they also are constantly aware of their obligations to responsibly represent the belly dance phenomenon to the public through their decorum and verbal explanations/defense of the dance. So by voluntarily preparing themselves to enjoy provoking widespread stereotypes about western aesthetics, feminism, sexuality, and age, and then continually testing their resolve before an audience, they have choreographed a fun path to empowerment.

Chapter 9

# REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

> *RQ1: How do women form a sense of identity in part through their practices as belly dancers, and how do they reflect upon those practices?*
>
> *RQ2: In what ways are the documentary production, interview, performance, and focus group methods –employed together in a documentary-driven methodology – appropriate to investigating the ways women incorporate belly dance practices into their individual identities?*

In the final chapter of reflection and summation, I wish to not overpower or overwrite understandings that I have tried so hard to empower the dancers to voice for themselves. I rather will draw this report to a close by providing readers with a framework for conducting responsible, ethical qualitative research with which to assess The Belly Dancer Project. And as these ethics mandate, I will end with a bit of contextualizing accountability.

## Ethics of The Belly Dancer Project

This research plan is based on the assumption that it is possible to develop meaningful understandings about and for belly dancers about their identity development vis-à-vis the belly dance phenomenon through a process I call the documentary-driven methodology. It incorporates phenomenological theoretical groundings, follows a participant-driven methodology, and a hermeneutical investigation of the described data.

How do we evaluate such research? Traditionally, the concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability have been used to evaluate both qualitative and quantitative social science. Janesick describes validity in the context of qualitative research to mean the appropriate matching between a given description and its explanation (2003). She, however, questions the necessity of the two other legs of

this trinity. Alternative to these three criteria, literary critic and cultural studies observer James Clifford states that the closely related methodology of ethnographic fieldwork hinges on the experience of the participant observer (the researcher), and it is that person's experience that serves as the unifying source of authority in the field.

Concurrently, ethnographic writing (and in particular, feminist ethnography) is constantly looking for new ways to better represent the participants' authority (Clifford, 1988), emphasizing the shared ethic of authority and issues of representation that need to be addressed when criteria for evaluation are discussed.

I propose evaluating this project according to four ethics of post-colonial ethnography put forward by Sarah A. De la Garza (writing as Maria C. Gonzalez 2003). The first is *Accountability*, which is not just in reference to telling the belly dancers' stories but also telling our own tale of the how we came to know their stories. In other words, it is the "story of our stories." This project incorporates centrally an emphasis on the researcher's experiential understanding of the phenomenon. Just as phenomenological reasoning dictates that we theorize our participants' motives, behaviors, and identities as originating from within their individual lifeworlds, we as researchers can therefore only describe our participants' world through our own individual perspectives. Therefore, as ethical researchers, we must add context to our reports by including the story of our stories.

The second ethic is *Context*. This is the necessity to describe the environment (or soap bubble) encapsulating the story one is telling. It is imperative for the researcher to describe the socio-political, physical, and emotional environments that shape the lives of her participants. In The Belly Dancer Project, at all levels, I have encouraged participants to interject and explore their experiences in a holistic

manner. The research design was developed with flexibility enough so that all manner of inputs (be that production concerns, logistical restrictions, thematic developments) from the dancers could be brought to the surface, discussed, and the research procedures adjusted accordingly. Much of what the dancers shared with me in the later steps (particularly during and after the exit interview) was not appropriate to share in this report, but these personal details nonetheless helped to clarify my understandings of their respective identity developments, and resulting descriptions that appear here reflect this holistic understanding.

The third ethic discussed by De la Garza (2003) is that of *Truthfulness*. This ethic calls on researchers to be "existentially naked about one's purposes and issues in life" (84). In other words, to be completely open and receptive in the act of seeing what is below the surface – not just in our participants' lives, but in our own. The ethic of truthfulness is built into every step of The Belly Dancer Project, as I have sought to be as open as possible with all project participants, contributors, and audiences. This is the process that is often referred to as leveling. In this report, the pronoun, *I* appears much more than in the more conventionally-written dissertation. This is particularly evident in the research process portion of each chapter (such as in Chapter 5, subheading Producing a Documentary-Driven Methodology) that function as a behind the scenes to add truthfulness and researcher context to the documentary and accompanying dissertation report.

The fourth and final ethic concerns *Community*. Community refers to those with whom we share our research, and the necessity to respond to those persons with compassion and openness. "Compassion is the willingness to open one's self to see, hear, feel, taste and smell everything about another's experience – at the same

time as we share our own experience without intentional or strategic fearful distortion so that it might also be experienced by those open to community with us" (85). This ethic extends the phenomenological sensitivity we've afforded our research subjects and ourselves as researchers, as well as to the communities of scholars and other publics with which we share our newly-generated understandings. This validates the lay-experiencer of one's research as a valid contributor to that research process. This project addresses the ethic of community with belly dancers by building-in feedback channels such as with the editorial interviews, focus groups and continued contact with the featured dancers. Community is fostered in academic circles as well, in that a substantial portion of this project's results are to be geared toward the academic community as a critique and opening of dialog of the methodology employed.

**Story of Our Stories**

During the fall of 2001 – just after beginning a sociology MA program at ASU, I hosted a houseguest from Missouri who first showed my hips how to shimmy. The next summer, in June 2002, I took my first belly dance class with my little sister, Jeanie, from a teacher named Yasmina, through the Mesa Parks and Recreation Department. Jeanie and I raced to buy our first hip-scarfs and giggled our way to class each week. I had already committed myself to a master's thesis topic, but I knew by the end of that first six-week course that I would devote my doctoral research to understanding the belly dance phenomenon – in some way.

A year after I took that first class, with my master's degree in hand, I went to San Francisco in an immersion ethnography class led by Sarah Amira de la Garza (quoted above), to begin learning about belly dance in the city that birthed American

Tribal style. I was fortunate enough to not only speak with the world renowned Carolena Nericcio in person and take a class in her *Fat Chance Bellydance* studio, but also to attend classes in San Leandro and interview members of the very spiritual Cabaret *Good Vibrations* troupe. I also performed for the first time – at a restaurant, to live music, for my fellow classmates. Since then I have taken a variety of classes, danced in Tribal, Cabaret, SCA[31], and informal settings, and spoken with many wonderful, diverse dancers. Through my research I have also made connections with women researching belly dance across the country, we have shared findings, and I have referenced their works in this report.

To situate The Belly Dancer Project academically, I would not strictly call it a work of anthropology, nor sociology, communications, film studies, or gender studies– although I have taken courses and/or consulted researchers in all of these disciplines to shape the final product. I am more inclined to call this an intentionally transdisciplinary work of feminist qualitative research, or feminist social science. It fits Travers' criteria of emphasizing reflexivity in the research process and being committed to increasing awareness among the group being studied (2001). In agreement with Kvale (1996), I have constructed a research project focused on the everyday lives of women, with the hope of better understanding those women's diverse situations and positionalities. By heeding the advice of Brown (1997) to structure my research design in a nonlinear (jazz) composition, rather than in a linear (classical) way, I have been able to harmonically accommodate a multiplicity of voices – and the multiplicity of ways I've gained access to those voices. In fact it is

[31] The Society for Creative Anachronisms (SCA) is a club of medieval re-creationists that strongly welcomes belly dance performers.

this nonlinear flexibility within my research method that has allowed for the most significant understandings to develop – which deepened with my relationships with each of the four dancers. And as "community" resides as a center point of the belly dance phenomenon, I now believe that it would have been impossible to draw-out these understandings if I had not (a) taken the time to participate in the community before proposing my dissertation project, and (b) come back to each dancer a number of times over several years and continue to build relationships with her.

> In thinking about dance as a metaphor for qualitative research design, the meaning for me lies in the fact that the substance of dance is the familiar; walking, running, any movement of the body. The qualitative researcher is like the dancer, then, in seeking to describe, explain, and make understandable the familiar in a contextual, personal, and passionate way. As Goeth has told us, "The hardest thing to see is what is in front of your eyes" (Janesick 2003:52).

I feel that Janesick's analogy is particularly apropos in helping me describe to a predominantly non-belly dancer audience what it is like to distill these findings into this report. Shortly before I submitted my formal proposal for this research to my committee, I quit belly dancing entirely because Goeth was absolutely correct – it is very hard to see what is right in front of you. Focusing a research gaze so intently on my own phenomenological soap bubble was so uncomfortable that my dancing experience was taken out of the present and I no longer enjoyed it. Every time I caught myself unselfconsciously being within a community of dancers or embodied within the dance, I felt guilty for not taking notes about my experience. So in order to cope, I chose to remove myself as a participant of the belly dance phenomenon. This separation marked the first of several mental blocks I encountered through the process of conducting The Belly Dancer Project, and because I experienced the

research so personally, I have since learned far more about the often all-encompassing and emotionally-intimate research process (and about myself) than I have about the women who practice belly dance.

Yet, here I stand at the end of this journey – a full ten years since my first hip shimmy. I am confident that with the generous help of the four featured dancers and countless other guiding voices shaping this research experience, I have not only uncovered a unique nebula of understandings about how women integrate belly dance into their identities, but I have also developed understandings about creative and empowering methods for asking such intimate questions. And I am very happy to say that as The Belly Dancer Project finally draws to a close, I have begun to dance again.

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# APPENDIX A

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION AND CONSENT FORMS

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY
Research Compliance Office
Office for Research & Sponsored Projects Administration
P.O. Box 873503
Tempe, AZ 85287-3503
Phone
(480) 965-6788
Facsimile
(480) 965-7772

| | |
|---|---|
| **To:** | Robert Bolin<br>ANTH |
| **From:** | Mark Roosa, Chair<br>Soc Beh IRB |
| **Date:** | 05/23/2008 |
| **Committee Action:** | **Exemption Granted** |
| **IRB Action Date:** | 05/23/2008 |
| **IRB Protocol #:** | 0705001815R001 |
| **Study Title:** | The Belly Dancer Project: A Radical Inquiry into the Self |

Ship on approval (see attached email) Ship mat 5/23/08

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) .

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

**CONSENT FORM – Featured Dancers**
**The Belly Dancer Project: An Inquiry into Identity**

The purposes of this form are to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in the study. Dr. Bob Bolin, Professor, School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University, and Ramsi McGhee, Ph.D. candidate, have invited your participation in a research study.

The research study is entitled The Belly Dancer Project: An Inquiry into Identity. The purpose in this research is to help belly dancers explore themselves in a public forum, using various social research tools. This project also helps the researcher (Ramsi McGhee) better critique the process of research itself.

If you choose to participate in this study (you must be 18 or older to participate), you and the researcher will talk about your experiences as a belly dancer, as well as the other things that make up who you are (e.g. your family, career, life history, religious and political beliefs, the 'stuff' you own, and/or your plans for the future). Based on your interests and comfort level, you will explore what it means to be you using a number of different research techniques. Most likely you will have one informal interview, which the researcher will record with video devices. Then, you (with or without your troupe of dancers) will be video taped dancing to three or more songs. After all the rough interview and performance video has been converted to DVD format, you and Ramsi will watch the footage together, and discuss how best to combine these elements into a ten-minute video about you. You will be given the opportunity to tell the researcher if there are parts of the interview and performance you'd rather not be shown, and parts that you would like to highlight.

Once your video has been edited together, you will have the opportunity to view it. Then, once a total of three-to-five videos have been completed, they will be shown to groups of belly dancers, who will watch them as part of a focus group discussion of their own identities and their own experiences with belly dance. Please note that we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of anything shared in a focus group setting.

Although The Belly Dancer Project could continue indefinitely, if you choose to participate in the project, the researcher is asking you for an initial time commitment of five to ten hours of interviews and research activities. All video and audio recordings will be stored indefinitely by the researcher (Ramsi McGhee).

Besides a loss of privacy, there are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified. Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the potential benefits of your participation are that you could gain a richer understanding of yourself; help fellow belly dancers understand themselves both individually and as a community; and help the academic community and the general public gain a better

understanding of belly dancers, and of the complex relationships between researchers and their research subjects.

The researcher is obliged to maintain the confidentiality of the data she collects, so if something comes up in an interview or performance that you do not want to appear on the video or in published reports, please make your intentions clear, and it will not. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, in which the researcher will identify you by the pseudonym you have chosen for yourself, or by your name if you so choose.

Your participation in this study is absolutely voluntary. It is ok for you to say no. Even if you say yes now, you are free to say no later, and withdraw from the study at any time. If, for any reason, you wish to delete something from your video-taped interview and performance from record, the researcher will do so immediately, and not refer to it in any subsequent report or publication. If you choose to withdraw completely from The Belly Dancer Project, the researcher will immediately destroy all of your personal information. There is no payment for your participation in the study.

If you have questions concerning the research study, please call Dr. Bob Bolin at (480) 965-6215, or Ramsi McGhee at (480)221-5049. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at 480-965 6788.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study. By signing below, you are granting to the researcher the right to use your responses, likeness, image, appearance and performance - whether audio or video recorded - for presenting or publishing this research.

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
|---|---|---|
| Participant's Signature | Printed Name | Date |

"I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential
benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research study, have answered
any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature. These elements of Informed Consent conform to the Assurance given by Arizona State University to the Office for Human Research Protections to protect the rights of human subjects. I have provided (offered) the subject/participant a copy of this signed consent document."

Signature of Investigator_____
Date_____

## CONSENT FORM – FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

**The Belly Dancer Project**
**Ramsi McGhee**
**School of Human Evolution and Social Change**
**Arizona State University**

The purposes of this form are to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in the study.

Dr. Bob Bolin, Professor, School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University, and Ramsi McGhee, Ph.D. Candidate, have invited your participation in a research study. The research study is titled The Belly Dancer Project. The purpose of this research is to help belly dancers explore themselves in a public forum, using various social research tools. This project also helps the researcher (Ramsi McGhee) critique the process of research itself.

If you choose to participate in this study (you must be 18 or older to participate), you will watch a video highlighting several other belly dancers who have been filmed in an interview and a performance. Then you will be asked to discuss your reactions to the video along with the other dancers with whom you watched the video. Along with Ramsi and the other dancers, you will be discussing what it means to you to be a belly dancer, how belly dancing fits into the rest of your life, and other themes that you find interesting in the video. This discussion will be audio taped. All audio recordings will be stored indefinitely by the researcher, Ramsi, and used in research reports and publications

Please note that we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of anything share in a focus group setting. However, we will make no attempt to identify you by your audio recorded voice in any future reports or publications. Also, we will make no attempts to link your quotes from the focus group to any of the information you provide on the mail-in survey (if you choose to complete that). Any reference to your recorded responses will only identify you by rough demographic and belly dance-related criteria (a 30-40 year-old white Cabaret dancer, advanced student level), and by the name of your particular group (Mahin, Terri, etc.).

Although The Belly Dancer Project could continue indefinitely, if you choose to participate in the project, the researcher is asking you for an initial time commitment of two hours to watch the video and discuss it with Ramsi and the other belly dancers in your group.

Besides a loss of privacy (from your audio recorded or transcribed answers being used in a publication or video), there are no known risks from taking part in this study, but as in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified. Although there may be no direct benefit to

you, the potential benefits of your participation are that you could gain a richer understanding of yourself; help fellow belly dancers understand themselves both individually and as a community; and help the academic community and the general public gain a better understanding of belly dancers, and of the complex relationships between researchers and their research subjects.

The researcher is obliged to maintain the confidentiality of the data she collects, so if something comes up in the focus group that you do not want to appear in published reports, please make your intentions clear to Ramsi, and it will not. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, in which the researcher will identify you by the pseudonym you have chosen for yourself, or by your name if you so choose.

Your participation in this study is absolutely voluntary. It is ok for you to say no. Even if you say yes now, you are free to say no later, and withdraw from the study at any time. If, for any reason, you wish to delete a response from the record, the researcher will do so immediately, and not refer to it in any subsequent report or publication. If you choose to withdraw completely from The Belly Dancer Project, the researcher will immediately destroy all of your personal information. There is no payment for your participation in the study.

If you have questions concerning the research study, please reach Dr. Bob Bolin at (480) 965-6215, or Ramsi McGhee at (480)529-0516/ rwatkin@asu.edu . If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Research Compliance Office, at 480-965 6788.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study. By signing below, you are granting to the researcher the right to use your audio-recorded responses, rough demographic characteristics, and the name of your particular focus group (Mahin, Terri, etc.). Your audio recording in the focus group and your mail-in survey responses will not be linked.

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
|---|---|---|
| Participant's Signature | Printed Name | Date |

"I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature. These elements of Informed Consent conform to the Assurance given by Arizona State University to the Office for Human Research Protections to protect the rights of human subjects. I have provided (offered) the subject/participant a copy of this signed consent document."

Signature of Investigator_____
Date_____

# APPENDIX B

# INTERVIEW TOPICS

**Interview Topics for Featured Dancers**

How long have you been belly dancing (BD)?

And how did you get into BD?

How have you changed because of BD?

How much of your identity or self is wrapped up in being a BD?

How do you think you've changed as a BD as you've gotten older?

Do you think there's a big break between the 'BD World' and your everyday worlds?

How do you feel when you're dancing / costuming / listening to BD music, etc.?

Tell me about your relationships with other dancers.

Who in your life is most important to you?

Tell me about your family/household.

Do your parents/extended family play a big role in your life?

What was your childhood like?

Overall, what activities or events (daily/weekly/yearly) are most important to you?

Tell me about your job(s). What parts of your work do you take the most pride in?

How does BD fit into the rest of your life?

Tell me about your spirituality. How does that fit in with your BD practices?

What types of things are you looking forward to right now?

In the short term? Further down the road?

What is it like for you to be interviewed about these things?

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

What questions do you have for me?

# APPENDIX C

## THE BELLY DANCER PROJECT FILM

56 MINUTE DVD FILM

# APPENDIX D

# THE BELLY DANCER PROJECT FILM TRANSCRIPT

**Belly Dancer Project Transcript**

(Act 0/Preface) INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM

Belly dance exists at the edge of our imaginations, where the histories we think we know, collide with the exotic images we entertain in fantasy. The promise that a belly dancer can experience this alternate reality with other dancers or with an audience, presents perhaps the most potent draw that the belly dance phenomenon possesses.

So who does a woman become when she chooses to develop and often name her 'belly dance self'? Why is it that women who adopt a belly dance practice describe a 'love at first sight' experience with the dance, and that they knew at that moment they had found their form of expression?

How is it that insecure women find their way onto performance stages, shimmying all the bare skin that they had been taught to keep covered?

Why does belly dance have the power to infect women with the 'raven's disease,' that compels them to fill their houses and closets with shiny, sparkly baubles? Why do dance rooms pop up in the homes of every belly dancer who can spare a few square feet? And most importantly, how can the belly dance phenomenon create such profound improvements in the emotional wellbeing of the women who participate in it?

These are the questions surrounding the phenomenon of belly dance in the United States, at the beginning of the 21st century. This documentary, The Belly Dancer Project, is part of a larger anthropological study of 4 belly dancers who all live within a 150 mile radius of Phoenix, Arizona. The study explores the different ways these women have used belly dance to further develop and express their identities.

1. Gender – Pie Chart (Brown 2007)
2. Ethnicity –Bar Graph (Brown 2007)
3. Education – Bar Chart (Brown 2007)
4. Marital Status – Pie Chart (Brown 2007)
5. Age = 35. 4 Years (Brown 2007)

The women in this project participate in an international belly dance subculture. According to a 2007, large-scale internet survey,// within the U.S alone, roughly 97% of reporting belly dancers are female. 75% claim European descent. 36% have achieved a bachelors degree. 69% are in a long-term relationship. And the average dancer's age is 35.

Belly dancers hone their art in yoga studios, teachers' homes, community centers, and gymnasiums. Belly dance classes are taught in large cities and small towns across the country. A belly dance industry has likewise developed that sustains itself with little income from audiences, restaurant owners, or the general public. The belly dance phenomenon exists because women continue to seek it out to fulfill their

needs for a community of women, an engaging physical exercise, a practice for emotional wellness, and a vehicle for individual self expression.

Welcome to The Belly Dancer Project.

Act 1: INTRODUCTIONS TO THE DANCERS –

Voiceover – Introducing Dancers:
I would like to introduce you to four remarkable women. Each of these women has become involved in the belly dance phenomenon in a different way. Throughout the film you will see a number of differences and similarities among these dancers. They have chosen different styles of belly dance, and they have been involved in belly dance for different periods of time. // Most important to The Belly Dancer Project, is the fact that they each utilize the dance phenomenon in ways that speak to their individual identity-building needs. For example, women such as Terri and Shoshana draw much of their identities from their immediate dance communities, or 'troupes. On the other hand, Mahin and Nerissa also associate with other dancers, but find the independence of the solo dance answers their identity needs. Also the levels of involvement range from Nerissa, the hobbyist; to Shoshana, the troupe member; Terri, the troupe leader; and finally Mahin, the professional dancer. Within this film, their voices are allowed to speak for themselves – sharing their own stories of being American belly dancers.

1-A: TERRI INTRO QUOTES –

Terri-1 –
I've been belly dancing for a full decade. I started the week after my 40th birthday, and in June I just turned 50. (Congratulations) Thanks.

Terri-1 –
And then, as I said, right around my 40th birthday, I started, I was quite out of shape, and I didn't have a passion in my life, and I felt like something was lacking. And I saw a silly movie with a little girl dancing all by herself to some beautiful music, and I thought, 'ooh, I'd like to take belly dancing again.' So I just started asking the universe for a teacher, and a week before my 40th birth day, my husband at the time said, 'well there's going to be a belly dancer at the local restaurant, let's go.' So I went and I saw her, and she had not finished her introduction, before I was already weeping.' I mean, Joe looked at me and said, 'what is wrong with you?!' Because I was just weeping. She had this regalness of bearing, you know, she was a powerful person.

1-B: MAHIN INTRO QUOTES

Mahin –
I have been dancing for about eleven or twelve years altogether. Some of those were student years, some professional.

Mahin
I remember as a kid going with my family to these shows and my mom had a lot of the old LPs, with the (she gestures) on the cover. So I always loved the music, and it was something we went to see as kids. And then when I moved to Arizona, I saw a lot more of it going to like that Devonshire Fair out in downtown Phoenix, and going to the Renn Faires, and things like that. And I was involved in a group that was totally not dance related, that two of the women happen to be dancers, and had danced professionally at some point. So I would just go to parties at their houses, and we would start having fun with it, and they kept telling me, "you should take lessons, you should take lessons." And I never did. And then eventually I did. And then from there on it was just this long, rolling process.

Mahin –
I teach, I perform, I produce shows, and I go to school. So dancing is my form of income. It is my job, it is my whole life, pretty much at this point, besides school.

1-C: SHOSHANA INTRO QUOTES

Shoshana –
(How long have you been dancing?)
Nine and a half years.

Shoshana –
Actually it was a trip to the Renaissance Festival. During the trip there we went to see Domba, and it was the first time I had really seen that style of belly dancing. Usually it's beads, and shaking, and not much to it. I mean the costumes are expensive, but there's not much to them. But this was African tribal fusion style. It's all it took. As soon as they were done, I tipped them generously, ran right over to the Domba tent, and bought my first $800 costume. And I was hooked from then on.

Shoshana –
(How much of your self, or identity is wrapped up in belly dancing?)
I have to say probably all of it. Because it's the first thing I think about in the morning, and it's the last thing I think about before I go to bed. My kids talk about it all the time, if you look at their MySpace, their pages have links to my belly dance stuff on it. So I would have to say pretty much all of. It has eaten me up, I have become part of it.

1-D: NERISSA INTRO QUOTES

Nerissa –
I took my first class in about four years ago with Samia. And that was my first dance lesson ever in my life. I had just turned 40 at that time.

Nerissa –
I wouldn't say I'm identified that much as a belly dancer. I am a book keeper, number one. I'm fairly domestic. Now I do country dance as well. A small portion…

Because it's only been four years of my life since I took my first class, I've wouldn't say it's a huge identity. But it is something that inspires me. And it's something of mine. And it's something that I might occasionally be drawn away from, but I feel that I'll always go back to it. Most people acknowledge me as a rounded person. I'm not just a belly dancer, you know, I'm not just a working female. Like I said, I am a girlfriend, and I love to cook, I love to sew, I like to take care of a house.

1-E: FEATURED DANCER PERFORMANCE – NERISSA

2-A: DIFFERENCE IN STYLE – CABARRET STYLE vs. TRIBAL STYLE

Voiceover -- Cabaret Style Dance
Most of the belly dance in the western U.S., and the Phoenix vicinity in particular fits into two camps: Cabaret and Tribal Style dance. Mahin and Nerissa both dance variants of the Cabaret style, which is the most popular style of belly dance in the U.S. and around the world. This is normally a solo dance form, danced to traditional live or recorded Middle Eastern music, with or without choreography. Cabaret dancers generally wear a glittery, bra-and-skirt, or form-fitting 'gawazie' dress costume. // Belly dance was first scandalously imported to the U.S. more than a hundred years ago at the 1893 World Fair in Chicago. From there, the oriental image of the belly dancer was usurped by Hollywood, pin-up artists, and tobacco companies. These profit-seeking influences glitzed-up and further sexualized the dance and costuming, giving rise to the present day Cabaret style. Today we can see variants of this dance and costume in belly dancers from here to Cairo – and, of course, in Nerissa and Mahin.

Mahin –
When we were kids, myself and my other three sisters all danced the typical ballet, jazz, tap, the whole thing. And then into high school I did modern and more jazz, and less of the ballet. But when I started to do Middle Eastern style, it was Cabaret all the way. Always.

Voiceover -- Tribal Style Dance
Terri and Shoshana both self-identify as Tribal Style dancers. Tribal began as 'American Tribal Style' in the San Francisco Bay area, during the 1980s. In general, Tribal Style belly dancers integrate: Cabaret movements; folkloric dances; Flamenco postures; and Central Asian fabrics, coins, and dowry jewelry. Tribal got its name because of its loose ties to the Modern Primitive subculture that also aesthetically explores and blends the arts of ancient cultures with contemporary fashions.

Although, as Shoshana demonstrates, Tribal solos do exist, generally this style of dance is improvised in groups who rotate leaders, and then cue dance movements with gestures and vocal signals. // There are also a number of emerging Tribal fusions that incorporate the music, movements, and costume elements of hip-hop, techno, Goth, Poi, Baliwood, medieval, folkloric, and African tribal, as well as many other national and cultural influences. When labeled as fusion, Tribal troupes often

use choreography to some extent. // The costuming among Tribal Style dancers has much more variety than does Cabaret costuming, and although it often appears to be an authentic ethnic dress from some exotic culture, it is completely an American amalgam.

Shoshana –
…And tribal is so much more grounded. And then when you throw the word 'fusion' into it, you can do whatever you want. (Throw some Cabaret in there.) That really does come in handy, doing an hour and a half show. The Cabaret dancing in my early days really does help. (me???)…

Terri 1 –
(And how long have you been teaching?)
…Tribal Style belly dance. I don't call it strictly American Tribal Style because we dance on both sides of our body, and our repertoire is much more expanded. But what is American about our tribal style is that we are improvisers. We love to improvise….

2-B: LEARNING TO PERFORM

Voiceover -- becoming comfortable on stage:
In the beginning, most of a belly dancer's time is spent practicing and taking classes 'behind closed doors,' with other belly dancers. And most student dancers never decide to perform outside the low-key dance recitals that many teachers orchestrate for their students' families and friends. For those who do, making the transition to a publicly performing dancer is a difficult one that involves a fair measure of self confidence about one's body and mastery of belly dance. All of the dancers in this film have performed in public, with Mahin and Terri performing on a weekly basis.

Mahin –
Well, the first years were really about being a student, I'd say the first two years. And then the second/third year, that was mostly doing student shows, which my teacher really had to push me into doing. She asked me for six months straight, if I would do a solo at a student night, and this was a really low key, coffee house student night. And it took her six months of asking me, before I would do it, because it was a monthly event. And I finally did it, and then from then on I always did perform in those things. And then she had to, again, drag me to my first professional job at a party for New Years Eve. And that was another traumatic experience, but one I never went back from. Because once I did, I love it, and I enjoyed it. And so I spent most of the past eight years -- which have been the professional part of my performing -- doing a lot of restaurants, clubs, private parties, that kind of a thing.

Terri-1 –
There are a couple of things. When I first started dancing, of course I had some body image issues. And I was very nervous, and I took it very personally when people couldn't connect with my aesthetic, you know. I often read into little snickers

or giggles that people were making fun of me. I was a larger woman than I am now, and I'm still one of the largest people in our group, and I had stretch marks, and I felt very, you know… When I am actively dancing, even then when I was actively dancing, I always felt like a queen. But when I would look at the video or hear some sideways remark from someone, it would be very hurtful to me. I don't let that happen anymore, or I have just gotten past that, because I know that I'm a graceful dancer, and I know that what's more important than how I look, is what I make them think. So sometimes being outside of the Western aesthetic ten percent, you know that norm that everybody aspires to, sometimes being outside of that, I feel that, I've learned over the years, is my primary role. I can't tell you how many times, at the same gig where I heard somebody go, 'ahuu (disgust)', I have also had somebody come up, with tears in their eyes, saying, 'you made me think I can do anything I want to do. That I wasn't going to be stopped by someone else's perception of what is beautiful. So that, for me, has been a real big thing, that I have (???) in myself as a dancer.

Nerissa –
Now performing, I'm scared to death. I actually get physically sick for probably a week before the normal performance. If it's something I get short notice for, of course, it's just getting sick that day. (laughs) and of course having to go to the bathroom every five minutes before you go out… and I've been known to have the shakes so bad that my legs won't move…

2-C: AN EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

Voiceover—feeling the dance
Just as a lot of the dancers' experiences come from seeing themselves critically through the eyes of the audience and fellow dancers, so are they influenced by their own embodied experiences of the movements, costumes, and music that come together to make up belly dance. Many authors of belly dance's braided history and current presence within the Middle East discuss the ways that belly dance movements are meant for, and originate from, the physiology of the female form. This includes many of the movements used in Cabaret, and Tribal Style belly dance, in which a large portion of the belly dancer's catalog of movements strengthen belly, hips, and thigh muscles used in childbirth. The act of dancing in ways that fit so naturally upon women's bodies elicits positive, embodied experiences for many of the women who try it.

Nerissa –
Just me, I love to do veil. Maybe that has to do with the costuming, the sewing, I don't know, but I love to dance with the veil. And if I don't feel like dancing anything else, I love to do the veil. When I'm feeling very energetic, I love to do shimmies, and different things. It all depends on your mood, sometimes you feel like dancing slow, sometimes you want to go fast. I'm just so shy and insecure about my dancing, that sometimes I find it hard. (Even by yourself?) Yeah, sometimes…

Mahin –
I'm just in it. You know? When a song… I love dancing to live music, and when the musicians that I dance with most often are playing the music that I really love, which I'm totally spoiled that I have that, because they will play anything for me that I ask. And when I have that, it's almost like the audience kind of doesn't exist, at that point. And that's okay for part of the show. It's okay, people appreciate that, that you go so internal for the parts of the music that really get you. And sometimes when you can get the emotion and take it right out to them, and you can bring it back to them. It's just consuming, which I think is the best word for it is it's really consuming. Because not only is it in your ears, it's in what you see around you, it's in what you feel in your body. It's everything. It becomes your whole sensory experience, and that's the best, those are the golden moments on stage. (It's what keeps you going). Yeah, yeah. That's the reason. You don't get those every single night, you don't get them all along through the whole night, but when you get them, they're so worth it.

2-D: COSTUMING

Voiceover -- Costuming Types and Purpose

Although the type of costume wardrobe a dancer sets out to assemble is inextricably linked to the style of dance she does, an extraordinary encyclopedia of bells, coins, sequins, and beads act to lure her to belly dance costuming. This often causes women to purchase their first coin-edged hip-scarf after their very first lesson. Whether it be the bright or pastel Egyptian ensembles of the Cabaret dancers, or the dark brocades and tarnished jewelry from Central Asia used to adorn Tribal dancers, a full professional costume can easily reach $500 or $1000.

The exotic costumes often fly counter to Western aesthetics in the amount and location of skin they reveal, and come to help the dancer re-inscribe her own body with new symbols. These costumes across the board, are intended to remind the dancer and audience of her complex hip movements, and allow her to showcase the amazing abdominal flutters, belly rolls and undulations she has been rehearsing. Thus, costuming soon comes to take a prominent place in a dancer's discretionary income. Costumes can be ordered directly from the Middle East, bought from designers who frequent belly dance swap meets and festivals, purchased on EBay from other dancers, or constructed from patterns and various baubles the dancer accumulates from vendors.

Nerissa –
Well, I was taking a tai chi class at the Tempe Parks and Rec, and they were moving it to another night, to keep on with taking that class. I couldn't make it, so I went through the Parks and Rec booklet. 'Belly dance, hmm, that sounds interesting.' And my first class, Samia was doing costuming, and I've always liked costumes and sewing. It just had me hooked from that moment on. (The costumes got you?) Yeah (giggles).

Terri-1 –
So I can't think of a way that belly dance hasn't been completely integrated. I mean my closet even, you know, even my closet. (Costumes are in with your everyday clothes…) Well, actually I have it organized a little bit better. I have a walk-in closet, and three fourths of it is belly dance. A quarter of it is my work clothes and street, like I want to go to dinner with somebody. So mostly belly dance. (It slowly takes over) Well I was a voracious collector for the first five years. So now that I did that, now I can not actually do that voracious collecting, grab everything that I see, be a little more selective, now that I've been doing it long enough...

Mahin --
It influences … You're always looking for shiny things. They say you develop the, uh, uh, what do they call it, the 'Raven's Disease,' or something, where you're going through the store shopping for clothes or whatever, and anything with sequins or beads on it, your eye automatically goes to it, even though it's street clothes. So I think it just brings part of your personality forward, and, yes, it can dominate sometimes.

## 2-E: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

Voiceover -- (General) Impact of the BD Community
Arguably the most important factor influencing a belly dancer's successful adoption and enjoyment of the dance, as well as the depth to which she pursues it, are her experiences with an immediate group of dancers, and the larger belly dance community…

Shoshana –
Well, let me start with my immediate group. Hipnotic Hips. They have to be the most wonderful group of people I have ever met in my entire life. None of them wants to be the number one in the group. We all know who the real number one is (laughing), but she won't claim that. Whenever I feel bad about something, that's who I call, I call those girls. They are my friends, and they always make me feel better. And every time we are together, I come out feeling much better about myself as a person.

Nerissa –
Um, just the bonding with a lot of women, and especially women who are my age, who are going through a lot of things in life that I was going through. And it's just a positive experience. You go to class and everyone is happy to be there, and you have, just wonderful moments. And doing physical exercise always makes, you know, brightens up your day anyways. But I have met more wonderful women in the last four years doing belly dance then I have my entire life. And it's been the best experience.

Terri-1 –
As far as relating to dancers in general, whenever we go to festivals or workshops or whatever, I just love networking. I'm always disappointed when I can't go to a function, which has happened several times in the last couple of years, and it has been frustrating for me. I just have to let it go for one reason or another I haven't been able to go to this or that festival. That's disturbing to me, but oh well, life requires balance. But when I'm at those places, I just really enjoy the influx of new ideas, and I love how often I'm talking to people who I know through belly dance, and we're all on kind of the same page, and it just kind of happens spontaneously. …

3-A: TEARING HERSELF APART

Voiceover -- How BDs Compartmentalize or Don't
Obviously, like any other voluntary activity, individuals become involved with belly dance at different rates, and to different depths. This said, many women, at least newer dancers, find it helpful to 'segment' their identities, and to varying extents, draw out of themselves a different persona when they enter the 'belly dance world.

Mahin –
Ah, I think it really does make you reach inside of you, and grab a whole other part of your personality that really comes forward. I think part of that comes with the freedom to do something where you can almost be in an alter ego. A lot of women, they change their name, use a stage name, or things like that. You're dressed differently, you're out there doing something differently, and that gives them the freedom and the courage to do something that's outside what their normal personality would be. And it's not that it's something that's false, or imposed on top of the personality, it's just something that doesn't really have much of an opportunity to come to surface. So it's really them, it's just a different part of them that they get a chance to use.

Shoshana –
Okay, the way that I handle that, is when I'm going to be the belly dancer, I am no longer the mom. I totally become Shoshana, which is a totally different person. So I can leave all of that behind me, and I don't think about that. But when I come back, I can put that away, and then I become mom again, and I can be more on the right plane with them. But that's the way I keep up with it, I turn into a different person. On stage I'm somebody different. And it allows you to have a little bit of privacy in your life, if you're not the same person on stage as you are…
3-B: COMING OUT AHEAD

Voiceover -- How Women Change Because of BD
Belly dancers, almost across the board, gain self confidence in their bodies and performance abilities as they progress through the levels of involvement. Perhaps this is due to dancing weekly with women of all body types, who proudly 'put themselves out there,' in ways new dancers haven't ever done before. Also contributing to this is the fact that they are able to hone their dance skills in what are usually very positive, female-dominated spaces. This process develops a self reliance

and confidence within dancers, as they continue to move out of their comfort zones, and, as Terri says, to break through the limitations they previously felt were holding them back.

Terri-1 –
…Well, first of all, I discovered who I was. I really learned about my limit, and the places that I don't feel limited. And that had never happened to me before, where I had pretty much felt limited all the time. You know, I was unsure of my abilities, I wasn't particularly adventurous, and through belly dance, I learned that if I really wanted to learn it, I can. I mean age, you know, physicality, being a middle aged woman hasn't stopped me from doing anything that I want to do -- beyond a Moroccan drop, but that's okay, I'm going to dance until I'm 80, so I'll save my knees. I have become a better leader, and a much better teacher.

Nerissa –
I am more outgoing. I try things… Physically, I've always, you know, 'oh, I can't do that,' you know. But more than anything, is the close bonding with other women, and the inner strength it's given me to be a single female. A strength I've never had in the past.

Shoshana –
I think that the main change, well, you've got to start with the fact that I have eight children. And I've been married for, like 27 years. And in the course of raising those kids, you kind of get put off to the side and lose yourself. So you're no longer who you are, you're my mom, my wife, but you're never just who you are. So if I was being introduced to someone, they would say, 'this is so-and-so, this is Melanie, Hannah's mom. Well now I just get to be me, and someone's mother isn't the first thing someone says about me. It's all, 'this is Melanie, she is part of Hipnotic Hips… and she has eight kids.' Which is just a plus, you know.

3-C: FEATURED DANCER PERFORMANCE – MAHIN

4-A: FUTURE
Voiceover- Where BDs See Themselves in the Future (With BD)
In this film, we have seen how each of these belly dancers experiences the phenomenon of American belly dance. The dance has come to influence their lives, and their identity formations in very different ways. The characteristics of the individual relationships women currently have with the dance phenomenon, as well as the enduring attachments with the dance that they plan to continue into the foreseeable future, can be illustrated in the ways in which they describe belly dance within the context of their overall, life goals.

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Shoshana –
In the short term. Well, Tribal Café, can't wait to do that, because it's unlimited shopping, girlfriends, you can't beat that! And maybe putting together a DVD, our performance DVD, for sale, hopefully. And I'm hoping to keep my eBay business going, eventually maybe make some more money so I can go on a cruise (I giggle). That's my life's goal, in case anybody wants to know. Another cruise. And I want to be a gypsy when I grow up. They tell me I've got a good start on it.

Shoshana Static Screen:

'Like all good things,' Shoshana's Hipnotic Hips troupe has come to an end. She is no longer taking belly dance classes or dancing independently. However, she now happily spends her time with her grandkids, and writing an instructional book on 'retro' crafts from the 1970s.

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Nerissa –
I do have to say that I haven't seen my brother and his kids for many, many years. They're in Rapid City, South Dakota, and I'm going back there in August. But they made arrangements for my flight to get in early enough, because my youngest niece is taking belly dance classes, and she wants me to drop in on her class. (we laugh) And I'm so excited...

Nerissa Static Screen:

True to her word that she would always come back to belly dance, Nerissa is beginning classes again after a year-long break. She now has a new house, a new dog, a new job, and is busy planning her upcoming wedding. Her first home improvement was to build a dance room.

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Mahin –
Well, what I'm doing now is still kind of a vision in progress. I'm still trying to find out how to make it happen, and express it, but what I really want to do at this point is to have a multi-dancer professional troupe that performs more regularly together…

Then on the other end, I want to have a student company. Because you see so much growth in students, and it is very satisfying as a teacher, because I also do teach, I've been teaching for the past five years, and really, I'm interested in doing that. I so much enjoy seeing them progress, and taking them in to do a project with me, when they didn't think that they could do it, and then having them look at it afterwards and go, "wow, we did that." And that's really fun for me. I enjoy that very much.

Mahin Static Screen:

Since this filming, Mahin has earned her bachelor's degree with honors in Exercise & Wellness. She has taken her teaching to the larger bellydance community by travelling to conduct workshops nationwide and publishing the "Daily Bellydance Quickies" with 2000 subscribers around the world. Locally, she has refocused her work to include theatrical dance productions, special events, and cultural event performances.

———————

Terri-2 –
…I just want to be open to what it brings, and not have a real set plan. I know I'll be dancing. If the dancing is real different, I don't know. Who knows what influences are going to arrive…

Terri-2 –
…I just look forward to continuing to do the work. To be an important and integrity member of a community is hard work, and it takes constant, 'walking your talk.' so that is where I'm at right now. It's hard to picture the future beyond those nebulous ideas, but continuing to work, and continuing to dance…

Terri Static Screen:
Since being interviewed for this project, Terri has been awarded a bachelor's degree in Adult Education and will soon begin pursuing her Master's degree. After a brief retirement as director of Troupe Salamat, she is back at the helm. In 2011, the troupe birthed a new vision and mission, with a new format and the emergence of a student troupe, Sisters of Salamat!"

4B: FEATURED DANCER PERFORMANCE – TERRI

4C: CREDITS

- SCREEN 1:

The Belly Dancer Project

- SCREEN 2:

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- SCREEN 5

I Thank
Mahin, Nerissa, Shoshana, and Terri for the generous contributions they made of themselves, their art, their time, and their commitment to The Belly Dancer Project.

- SCREEN 6:

I Thank
Dr. Bob Bolin, Dr. Michelle Hegmon, and Dr. Hjorleifur Jonsson for their wisdom, patience, and guidance.

- SCREEN 7:

I Thank
My family, friends, and colleagues, and professors for their unending support, encouragement, and understanding throughout this project.

- SCREEN 8:

I Thank
My daughter, Princess Marlee, for her constant inspiration.
She is a beautiful dancer.

- SCREEN 9:

Belly Dance Statistics in Introduction:

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- SCREEN 10:

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- SCREEN 11

Photography Provided by Featured Dancers:

Mahin's Photographs:

Dave Wade Photography
Joseph Saddeh
Joe McKiernan

Nerissa's Photographs:

Herb Kissling
Tom Marrs

Shoshana's Photographs:

Gina Cinardo
Terri's Photographs:
Roy Willey

- SCREEN 12

Music Provided by Featured Dancers:

Mahin's Live Musicians:

Ghaleb El-Tawil
Joe Borik
Helen Finch

Nerissa's Recorded Music:

Olson P., D. Mannion (Pangia).
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Shoshana's Recorded Music:

Amina, Zohar
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- SCREEN 13+

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